

This electronic thesis or dissertation has been downloaded from the King's Research Portal at <https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/>



**The Battles of the Lys
the British Army on the Defensive in April 1918**

Blades, Geoffrey

Awarding institution:
King's College London

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without proper acknowledgement.

END USER LICENCE AGREEMENT



Unless another licence is stated on the immediately following page this work is licensed

under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

licence. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- Non Commercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works - You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Any of these conditions can be waived if you receive permission from the author. Your fair dealings and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

THE BATTLES OF THE LYS

The British Army on the Defensive in April 1918

Geoffrey David Blades

King's College

M. Phil.

ABSTRACT

The Battles of the Lys, which lasted from the 9 to 29 April 1918, were the second German attempt to break the British line in the spring of that year. As with the first German attack in Picardy on 21 March, using their new tactics of a hurricane bombardment and storm-troops, the British line was broken; but the BEF survived suffering no strategic loss, even though the Germans gained much ground.

During the winter of 1917/18 the BEF had turned to captured manuals in an attempt to copy German defensive doctrine; the Germans having become experts in the defensive battle by using the analytical expertise of a small group of staff officers. However, lack of experience led to faulty tactics, mainly having too many troops in the front line. Also, a shortage of drafts meant that there were few reserves to provide the counter-attack, an essential part of the German doctrine.

The German failure after their meticulous preparations creates a paradox. The answer is that the Germans were unable to exploit their spectacular initial success due to a failure of logistics; they could not bring material across the front-line area quickly enough, which meant that they were unable to keep the battle fluid. Also, by attacking towards Arras on the 28 March they delayed the attack in Flanders, which allowed GHQ sufficient time to re-form the shattered divisions which had been transferred north from Picardy. For a few days the situation looked serious for the BEF. Gaps appeared in the line which took the last of the reserves to fill, but the British held on tenaciously, this was after all the army that had learned its trade on the Somme and at Ypres.

CONTENTS

Abstract	2
Contents	3
List of Diagrams	4
Acknowledgements	5
List of Abbreviations	6
Introduction	7
 Chapter 1. The Development of German Doctrine and the Preparations for the Spring Offensives	 16
 Chapter 2. The British Preparations	 37
 Chapter 3. The Break-in Battle and its Preliminaries	 57
 Chapter 4. The Break-out Battle	 87
 Chapter 5. The 4th Guards Brigade and the Defence of Hazebrouck	 123
 Chapter 6. The Battle for the Reserves	 148
 Chapter 7. The Press and the Spring Offensives	 167
 Conclusions	 188
 Selected Bibliography	 201

MAPS AND DIAGRAMS

Introduction		
0-1	The Protagonists	13
Chapter 1.		
1-1	Sketch From French Fifth Army Instruction	20
1-2	Reverse Slope Position	22
1-3	German Offensive Plans	33
Chapter 3.		
3-1	German Attacks on the British	57
3-2	German Gains on the Somme	59
3-3	XIII Corps Defences	62
3-4	The Containment of the German Advance on the 9th	69
3-5	55th Division Defences	71
3-6	40th Division on the 9 April	74
3-7	Armentières Sector, 10 April	79
3-8	Messines - Wytschaete Ridge, 10 April	82
Chapter 4.		
4-1	Position of the Nieppe Forest	89
4-2	Merville Sector 11/12/13 April	92
4-3	Merville Sector 15 April	93
4-4	Merville Sector 18 April	94
4-5	Merville - Bailleul Front, 11/12/13 April	97
4-6	31st Division on the 11 April	98
4-7	Merville - Bailleul Front, 14 April	103
4-8	Fall of Bailleul	105
4-9	Kemmel and Ypres Salient, 16 April	107
4-10	The Loss of Kemmel - 25 April	111
Chapter 5.		
5-1	The Battle Area	124
5-2	British Positions, Dawn 12 April	128
5-3	The First German Attack	130
5-4	The Brigade Advance	132
5-5	The Position After the Attack	133
5-6	British Positions, Evening 12 April	136
5-7	British Positions, Dawn 13 April	138
5-8	The Break-up of the Line	141
5-9	The Position at the End of the Battle	143

Divisions are shown as x Div, brigades with number only.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While a thesis is a student's own work, many people influence its preparation. Special thanks must go to my supervisor, Professor Brian Bond, who oversaw my transition from chartered engineer to military historian, and whose comments were always worth taking note of. My colleagues at the Military History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research gave me many suggestions and pointers; while Jacqui Hamilton helped with the typing and corrected many grammatical errors. Museum, archive and library staffs gave freely of their time; especially Rosemary Blackshaw of the Woburn Sands public library, who obtained rather more inter-library loan books than I was allowed. Lastly, but not least, my wife, who allowed many jobs to go undone until this thesis was finished.

Crown copyright material in the Public Records Office is reproduced by permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. All other copyrights are acknowledged.

* * *

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather; who, as 21523 Private Albert Shipley 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards, was captured near Merville on 12 April 1918.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BEF	British Expeditionary Force, in 1918 officially ‘The British Armies in France and Flanders’.
BGGS	Brigadier-General General Staff, the senior staff officer of a corps
BGRA	Brigadier-General Royal Artillery, the artillery commander of a division or corps.
CEP	Portuguese Expeditionary Force.
CO	Commanding Officer, usually a lieut.-colonel commanding a battalion.
CRE	Commander Royal Engineers, senior engineer in a division.
MGGS	Major-General General Staff, the senior staff officer of an army.
GHQ	General Headquarters, situated at Montrieul-sur-Mer.
GOC	General Officer Commanding, officer commanding a corps or division.
GQG	<i>Grand Quartier Général</i> , French General Headquarters.
GSO	General Staff Officer.
HE	High Explosive shell.
HQ	Headquarters.
RFA	Royal Field Artillery.
OC	Officer Commanding, usually a company or platoon.
OHL	<i>Obersten Heeresleitung</i> , German General Headquarters.
SAA	Small arms ammunition.
SWC	Supreme War Council.

The ranks and titles used in this thesis are those held during the battle. In the army a rank goes with a position; for example, a division is always commanded by a major-general. During the war officers were often temporarily promoted two or three levels above their normal or substantive rank to an ‘acting’ rank. Thus, a battalion might be commanded by a captain or major, but while in that post he held the rank of acting lieut.-colonel. Except in official publications, such as medal citations, the ‘acting’ was omitted. This convention has been followed in this thesis, the ranks which go with each position have been assumed.

INTRODUCTION

There are few opportunities to study the British Army in defence during the Great War after the initial mobile phase. In fact, except for Second Ypres in 1915 and Verdun in 1916, the Germans mounted no major offensives in the West, until the *Kaiserschlacht* opened on the 21 March 1918. By the beginning of April, when the offensive in Picardy petered out, the Germans had created a huge salient in the British and French lines and almost captured Amiens, the railhead that fed the British Third and Fifth Armies. On the 9 and 10 April they attacked again north and south of Armentières and so began the Battles of the Lys.¹

Since the cessation of hostilities hundreds of memoirs, diaries and histories, popular, learned and regimental, have been written about the Great War. These are not, however, evenly spread; the first three years, especially the Somme, have had far more written about them than 1917 and 1918, the latter being very much a ‘poor relation’, which is strange considering it was the year of victory. The few books that have been written on 1918, while covering the German offensives, tend to concentrate on the March battle on the Somme, which is understandable given its larger scale; but there has been to date no detailed study of the Lys. One reason for this lack of study of the German offensives may be the sheer complexity of the battle; following the two volumes of the Official History that cover the period requires a major effort of concentration by the reader.

It is perhaps difficult to do justice to a battle lasting twenty days in just a few pages and so authors have picked out the most interesting points. The failure of the Portuguese to hold the line and their rescue by the King Edward’s Horse and the XI Corps Cyclists appears in every account. It is, after all an exciting story. But what of the defence of the Messines ridge, Ploegsteert wood or the Nieppe forest? This thesis will try to go some way to redress this balance. However, the detailed narrative of what happened is already contained in the Official History and so this thesis will concentrate

¹ These attacks are known variously as the ‘Spring Offensives’, ‘Ludendorff Offensives’ or ‘Peace Offensives’; the former will be used in this thesis.

on two aspects of the battle: how well the British (and Belgian) defences withstood the German attacks and what stopped their advance.

Anyone writing on a Great War battle would be foolish not to refer to the Official History. Its compiler, as he termed himself, Brigadier-General Sir James Edmonds, served at GHQ throughout the war and thus was in an ideal situation to know what happened. Unfortunately being a soldier and writing about his colleagues has laid him open to the charge of distorting the narrative in favour of the army - others may wish to express it stronger than this.² Edmonds admitted to this in his correspondence with Liddell Hart when the latter accused him of 'Trade Unionism' in his volumes on the Spring Offensives. He replied that he could 'not give away people he had lived and worked with all his life'.³ Even keeping Edmonds' prejudices in mind the Official History is still the most accurate and detailed account of the battle. Where he shows his hand is in his treatment of the 'political' aspect of the battles, the preparations taking up considerable space in 1918 Volume I. By emphasising the manpower shortage, the extension of the Fifth Army line by twenty-five miles and the diversion of troops to other theatres, he tried to lay the blame for the BEF's failure to hold the line on Lloyd George.

Edmonds' narrative success was due to his method, which had been perfected by the thirties when the 1918 Volumes I and II were produced. A first draft was prepared from war diaries, after battle reports and regimental histories when they were available. This was then sent for comment to officers of all ranks who were there - over 1500 in this case - although how they were chosen is unclear, it was obvious that he was looking for confirmation rather than facts.⁴ Many of the replies to Edmonds' draft have survived and in general show how accurate he was.⁵ These replies follow a pattern. After thanking him, sometimes rather obsequiously for allowing them to contribute, they agree with his version of events or perhaps questioning exactly which unit did what. Many contributors complained about Edmonds' rather formal style, suggesting the inclusion of some 'human interest' element that they were, of course, able to supply. Many of these anecdotes have to do with the liberation of livestock or poultry to feed the troops. Edmonds' trawl for veterans was not confined to the UK, he corresponded with

² For much of the war he was Deputy Engineer-in-Chief. See French D, "'Official but not History'?", Sir James Edmonds and the Official History of the Great War', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 131, No. 1 (March 1986), p. 58.

³ LHCMA, Liddell Hart MSS, 11/1933/24: Edmonds to Liddell Hart, June 1933.

⁴ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. vi. Even so, this was only a small sample of the total involved.

all corners of the Empire. A check to see how much notice Edmonds took of his correspondents' corrections produces inconclusive results. The problem is that we do not have the first draft to check against the final. Often, he was asking people to check his version against their memories over ten years after the events; regimental histories, which are discussed below, generally agree with the Official History.

Not all of Edmonds' correspondents were so congenial. The drafts of 1918 Volume I caused a ruffling of feathers within the old Fifth Army command, or to be more specific, with Gough⁶ and Maxse.⁷ In September 1934 Gough informed Maxse that he had been reading the proofs for March 1918 and that 'there are some comments and strictures at the end, summing up the first two days fighting, which seem to me rather severe on you and me. I would much like to have your views.'⁸ There then ensued an acrimonious exchange of letters between Maxse and Edmonds. The difficulty was that Maxse had already received copies of the first and second drafts and, as Edmonds pointed out, 'now, at zero minus five minutes you express yourself dissatisfied'.⁹ Maxse could see himself taking the blame for the failure to hold the Somme line in the first days of the battle. He wrote to his brother Leo in May 1918 expressing his concern that 'the lawyers and politicians will try to save their dirty skins at the expense of us soldiers, as usual'.¹⁰ Later, he wrote to Edmonds: 'Their eagle eyes did not detect me.'¹¹ But those of the Official Historian did.'¹² Edmonds had the last word though: 'but there was no getting over the fact that XVIII Corps [Maxse's] did make a "long bound" back to the Somme and then failed to hold the line.'¹³

After the Great War most regiments of the British Army commissioned a history relating their part in the battles, often written by a former officer of the regiment. Generally, the book was produced by taking the unit war diaries, reports and private papers and fleshing these out into a continuous narrative. It is interesting to compare the text of a history and the war diary or a report, in which the same phrases are often used. The authors were also able to contact survivors for clarification when documents were scarce; for example, diaries for units involved in the March 1918 fighting often do not

⁵ PRO CAB 45 Series.

⁶ General Sir Hubert Gough, GOC Fifth Army.

⁷ Lieut.-General Sir Ivor Maxse, GOC XVIII Corps.

⁸ WSRO, Maxse MSS, 387: Gough to Maxse, 13 Sept. 1934.

⁹ WSRO, Maxse MSS: Edmonds to Maxse, 7 Oct. 1934.

¹⁰ WSRO, Maxse MSS, T248: Ivor Maxse to Leo Maxse, 11 May 1918.

¹¹ Lloyd George, Henry Wilson and Foch, referred to earlier in the letter.

¹² WSRO, Maxse MSS: Maxse to Edmonds, 5 July 1935.

¹³ WSRO, Maxse MSS: Edmonds to Maxse, 8 July 1935.

exist, or when they do they are very sketchy. Some divisions, especially Regular or Territorial ones, also wrote histories. The method of preparation was the same, but the personalities are often missing. Armies and corps, which were continuously changing their constituent formations, generally did not write histories.

The regimental histories of the three Guards regiments that made up the 4th Guards Brigade, whose defence of Hazebrouck is used as an example of a unit action, are interesting examples of the type. The Grenadier history reads very much like an extended report,¹⁴ listing officers who were present at each action and the subsequent officer casualties; whereas, the Coldstream's historian,¹⁵ tried to write a history of the war. In the middle of the description of this action he describes 'recent actions in Italy', which have little relevance. The Irish Guards were the only regiment to have their history written by a Nobel Prize winner.¹⁶ Rudyard Kipling wrote it in memory of his son John, who was killed at the Battle of Loos while serving with the regiment. As one would expect from so eminent an author the book is full of wonderful descriptive passages and examples of his music-hall cockney dialogue, although for some reason there is no Irish brogue. Of the three authors Kipling mentions the men as much as the officers, although the accuracy of his narrative leaves much to be desired. As one would expect the Guards Division has a history, written by Colonel Cuthbert Headlam, who later edited the *Army Quarterly*.¹⁷ It is one of the most readable of those written by professional soldiers. Regimental histories rarely made comment on the conduct of the war, tactics or strategy; being very much 'How our regiment won the war', or perhaps more exactly 'How the war could not have been won without us'!

The other major published sources used in the preparation of this thesis are biographies, including edited diaries. Again, we have to be circumspect in their use as diarists are unlikely to admit their errors. Another problem is accuracy, as autobiographies are often written many years after the events, and facts often become mixed. A good example of this is *The Memoirs of Lord Chandos*,¹⁸ who was brigade major of the 4th Guards Brigade whose defence of Hazebrouck is used as an example of a unit action. While he gives a wonderful account of what it was like to be there, many small details are at variance with the facts. Chandos was not lying, but since the book

¹⁴ Ponsonby, F, *The Grenadier Guards in the Great War 1914-18*, 3 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1920).

¹⁵ Ross-of-Bladensburg, Sir J, *The Coldstream Guards 1914-18*, 2 vols., (London: OUP, 1928).

¹⁶ Kipling, R, *The Irish Guards in the Great War*, 2 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1923).

¹⁷ Headlam, C, *The Guards Division in the Great War*, 2 vols., (London: Murray, 1924).

¹⁸ Chandos, Lord, *The Memoirs of Lord Chandos* (London: Bodley Head, 1962).

was written forty years later, his memory was probably faulty.

The search of personal papers can give very mixed results. General Horne's papers yield virtually nothing. He is one of the few senior generals of that era without a biography. General Rawlinson disciplined himself to write one page in his diary each day, which gives useful detail about his staff's efforts to build the defences around Ypres. One of the best sources has been the papers of Rawlinson's MGGS, Major-General AA Montgomery (later Montgomery-Massingberd), which contain many orders and manuals not in the Public Record Office.

Only English language sources have been used in the preparation of this thesis which restricts the German version to those works - mainly biographical - that have been translated. While, if only for the sake of completeness, it might have been useful to have the German thoughts on the battle, this lack of information has not impeded any of the narrative. Similarly, as this thesis is about a British battle a detailed comparison with French tactical doctrine, while it would make an interesting study, has been omitted.

During the Great War the Germans became the experts in the defensive battle. This skill makes a useful benchmark with which to test the ability of the BEF during early 1918, and to look for reasons why they did not do as well as they might. In doing this one has to be careful not to become enmeshed in the idea that everything the Germans did was correct. There is a great myth surrounding German efficiency; in many cases the British were just as good. For instance, the German interception of British front-line telephone traffic is well-known, but the fact that the British did the same thing is rarely quoted.

The study of German defensive doctrine started with the publication of a series of articles in the *Army Quarterly* by Captain G C Wynne which were later combined into a book.¹⁹ In his book Wynne proposed that the German success was due to the work of one officer - Colonel Fritz von Lossberg. A later study by Captain Timothy Lupfer leant more to the German Army system.²⁰ Whether 'evil genius' or the system, the Germans had to both introduce new concepts and change existing ideas. It will be shown that what today we would call the management of change was the key to the

¹⁹ Wynne, GC, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940). This odd title may have something to do with the date of publication, a time when the prospect of an attack in the West was a reality.

²⁰ Lupfer, TT, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Combat Studies Institute, 1981).

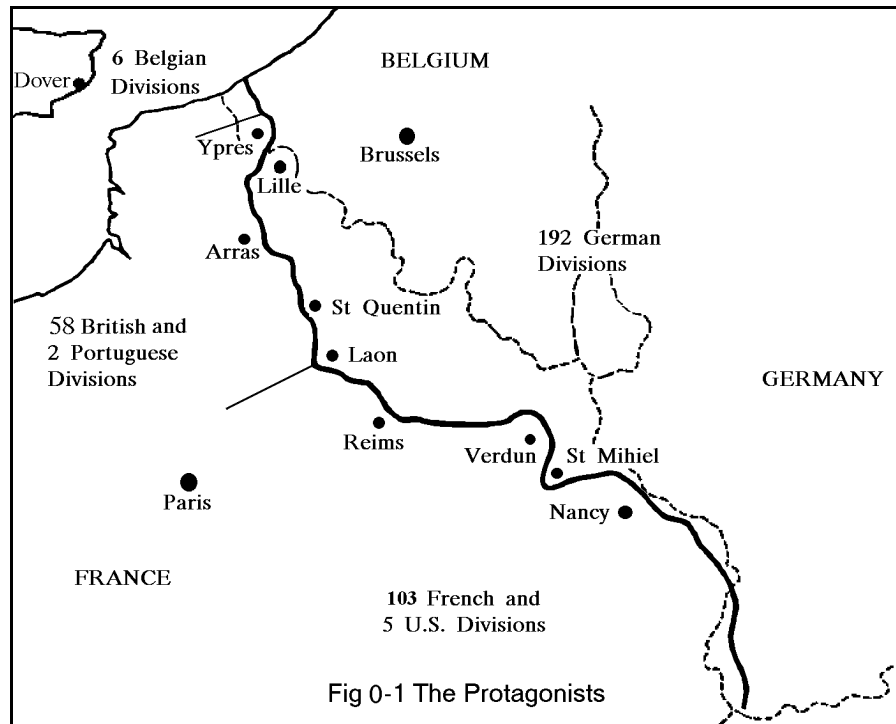
German success. When developing their offensive doctrine the Germans introduced no new major innovations, instead relying on refining existing techniques. Even after studying Allied offensive methods they failed to appreciate the potential of perhaps the greatest technical innovation of the war - the tank.

The deteriorating internal situation in Germany and Austria coupled with the failure of the 1917 submarine campaign meant that the Germans had to win the war in 1918.²¹ The German victories in the East which knocked Russia out of the war, meant that they had the opportunity to take the offensive in the West. The arrival of the Americans in large numbers gave a sense of urgency to the Germans' deliberations. They knew they had to defeat the French and British before the summer, otherwise their manpower superiority would be lost. But, where should this great war-winning offensive take place? Every part of the line from Verdun to the North Sea had its pros and cons, but presumably the area from Verdun to the Swiss border was considered unsuitable due to the mountainous terrain and the lack of any strategic objectives. The appreciation written by Colonel Wetzell, head of operations at OHL, outlined the German thinking and at first glance looks very sensible. It will be shown that there were serious flaws in the German thinking.

On the other side of no-man's-land the British had concentrated their efforts on building a European style army and using it in offensive operations, giving little thought to the defence. Thus in December 1917, when they realised that a German attack was likely the next spring, they had to start from scratch as the Germans had done three years before. Rejecting the views of a committee formed to look into defensive doctrine, GHQ in an endeavour to follow the German doctrine in captured German manuals, issued orders for the construction of a defensive system in December 1917, based on zones rather than lines. It has been argued that one reason for the British failure to hold the front line in March and April 1918, was their use of an outdated manual. It will be shown that which manual was used is largely irrelevant, because what GHQ failed to do was change the BEF's fundamental ideas in key areas as the Germans had done: for example, reducing the density of troops in the front line, the use of reverse slopes, and giving up ground of no tactical value. It will be argued that there was insufficient time to make all these changes, and that it required actual experience of the defensive battle to show the need for change.

²¹ See Herwig, HH, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (London & New York: Arnold, 1997), pp. 351-387.

The construction of the defensive system was a major undertaking by the BEF, requiring the devising of defensive plans for each divisional sector which were then collated into corps and army plans. The infantry, pioneer and labour battalions constructed the new works required by the plans and much new wire was laid. It can be shown that while the doctrine was suspect the 'works' were professionally carried out.



On the 21 March these defences were put to the test, when the Germans attacked the southern sector of the BEF on a forty mile front with seventy-six divisions, under the cover of a morning mist. The German success was immediate and within a week the Fifth Army had been pushed back forty miles until a combination of Anglo-French troops and extended German supply lines forced the advance to stop. After an abortive attempt to capture Amiens the Germans attacked towards Arras at the junction of the Third and First Armies. Here the new storm-troop tactics had their first failure, the result of the actions of XIII Corps commander, Lieut.-General De Lisle. Meanwhile tired British divisions were being sent north, in exchange for fresh ones, to rest and refit. During April many of these divisions would incur casualties for the second time in a month. However, this does give us the opportunity to see if they learned anything.

One major difference between the Lys and the battle in Picardy was the lack of German progress after they had breached the British line. The failure of the Portuguese, and the 40th Division on their left, meant that the Germans were able to make over three

miles on the first day, a feat they never repeated. Instead of collapsing, the BEF conducted a fighting retreat, disputing every inch of ground until the German advance stalled. We shall not look at this retreat in detail but concentrate on how the German advance was stopped. The Germans had three primary objectives, Hazebrouck, Bailleul and the Flanders Hills with a subsidiary one southwards towards Béthune. It will be shown that there were two main reasons for the British success: the bravery of the regimental officers and men, and the advantage gained when the artillery and infantry were able to combine.

Many sacrifices were made as the British troops tried to halt the German advance. One example was the stand by the 4th Guards Brigade before Hazebrouck. For two days these three battalions blocked the German advance, while the British 5th and Australian 1st Divisions formed up behind them. So fierce was the fighting that the brigade suffered eighty percent casualties, high by even Great War standards. While none of the participants are still alive at the time of writing,²² many of the messages carried by battalion and brigade runners have survived, these will be used to explain what happened. In addition, an assessment will be made of how ready the brigade was for mobile warfare.

Any study of the winter and spring of 1918 soon produces a paradox: if the German preparations were so meticulous, and the British so inept, why did the Germans fail in their bid to destroy the BEF? Many authors have put forward reasons and these will be discussed in an endeavour to answer the question: German failure or British success.

At the military/political level it took the threat of a German success, and perhaps a war-winning one, to bring the British and French Armies together under a single commander, General Ferdinand Foch. After a faltering start at Doullens on the 26 March, Foch was confirmed as Generalissimo on the 3 April at the Beauvais Conference. Thus, the Lys was the first battle fought under this unified command. Just because Foch was given the job did not mean that national sentiments disappeared overnight. Haig's reason for pushing for the creation of this post was to gain access to the French reserves, his own being almost non-existent. This chapter will show how Haig, by dogged persistence, overcame French reluctance to assist the BEF.

Any major German success in the spring of 1918 might have produced defeatism on the British Home Front. It is amazing how the British civilian morale held up during

four years of indecisive battles and seemingly endless casualties. Before the advent of radio and television, newspapers were the main medium for reporting any event. It has been shown that the full horror of the war was kept from the public at home by the authorities, concerned that if the truth be known then there would be a clamour to stop the fighting.²³ Offensives were reported as going according to plan, while retreats in the face of counter-attacks were strategic withdrawals. This conspiracy worked during the offensives of 1916 and 1917, because the public had no way of comparing the planned with the actual advance. However, the huge gains in territory made by the Germans during March and April 1918 brought a different problem: how to present it while still maintaining civilian morale and confidence in the army. The final chapter will look at how the German advances of March and April were depicted in the national Press and whether the truth was told.

²² According to the regimental offices

²³ See for instance: Knightley, P, *The First Casualty* (London: Deutch, 1975), p. 109.

Chapter 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GERMAN DOCTRINE AND THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE SPRING OFFENSIVES

During the early months of 1918 the BEF endeavoured to copy the German defensive doctrine in their preparations for the expected German offensive. The concepts of defence in depth and elastic defence were the result of a continuous evolution by the Germans, and an understanding of them is required to appreciate the task that confronted the British and their allies. Also, the Germans' successful defence of their line during three years of war, may then be used as a benchmark to judge the performance of the BEF.

The development of German doctrine started in the early days of the war. Their failure to defeat the French in 1914 resulted in the armies of both sides facing each other in a continuous line from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border. Such was the firepower of modern weapons, especially artillery, that the soldiers had only one recourse - to dig the trenches that have become synonymous with the Great War. Lines of trenches were not new; the most recent example, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, had been witnessed by observers from all the major European powers. However, two new factors had entered the equation. The sheer length of the line which would require a large garrison to hold it; and, more important, there was no way of outflanking the enemy, which meant that any breach of the line would have to be by direct assault.

The Germans had insufficient troops for offensives on two fronts, so their war strategy was to defeat the French before turning on the Russians, who would be slower to mobilise owing to the large distances involved and poor communications. The stalemate in the West meant that the Germans would have to hold the line while transferring troops to the East. It was not until the end of 1917, after the Bolshevik government withdrew Russia from the war and signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, that Germany could finally transfer troops to the Western Front and look for victory in the West.

The study of this defensive stance was started by Captain GC Wynne, one of Edmonds collaborators on the Official History, in a series of articles in the *Army*

Quarterly in 1937-39;¹ his purpose was to show that the army was still using the defensive tactics it chose in 1918 in the current edition of Field Service Regulations. He used much of this material for a book.² In his writings, which may be considered the standard work on the subject, Wynne showed how the Germans developed their defensive tactics by continuously looking in detail at all the major battles. Other authors, Lupfer,³ Gudmundsson⁴ and Samuels⁵ have written on the subject, all relying heavily on Wynne.

One crucial factor in the development of the German defensive doctrine was the Operations Section of their General Staff (OHL). Under the German system, in the event of war the whole of the General Staff moved to the front, instead of forming a specific one for a particular campaign as the British did. War on two fronts meant that the staff would have to be split. Therefore, in early 1915 the Operations Section was divided, its head, Colonel Tappen, moving to command the eastern part leaving his deputy, Colonel Fritz von Lossberg, to lead the western branch based at Mézières. The name of this department may have given a false impression of its function. The small group of about twelve officers acted as both originators and a clearing house for new ideas and plans, i.e. research into how battles should be fought rather than the actual planning.⁶ Today we would call this operational research. Wynne makes the claim that the German success in defence was due to Colonel von Lossberg, while Lupfer felt it was 'a corporate effort using the talent of several great soldiers.'⁷ At first von Lossberg was a supporter of 'rigid defence' and the fight for the front line. He became so irritated by the discussions in the mess on a more flexible approach that he forbade any mention of the subject. It was able to restart after he moved to take up a field command.⁸ The Operations Section was responsible for the writing of the two manuals for the defensive doctrine: *The Principles of Field Construction* and *The Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare*, first published in November and December 1916

¹ Wynne, GC, 'The Development of the German Defensive Battle and its Influence on British Defence Tactics', *Army Quarterly*, 'Part I', Vol. XXXIV, No.1 (April 1937), 'Part II', Vol. XXXIV, No.2 (July 1937), 'Part III', Vol. XXXV, No.1 (October 1937), 'The Chain of Command', Vol. XXXVI, No.1 (April 1938), 'The Legacy', Vol. XXXVII, No.2 (October 1939).

² Wynne, *If Germany Attacks*.

³ Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine*.

⁴ Gudmundsson, BI, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-18* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

⁵ Samuels, M, *Doctrine and Dogma* (Westport Conn., Greenwood, 1992).

⁶ Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine*, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁸ In September 1915 von Lossberg became chief-of-staff of the Third Army, his place being taken by Major Wetzell.

respectively. The Germans were both pro-active and reactive in the development of their doctrine and so the two documents were continuously revised in the light of experience or to communicate new ideas. The BEF used translations of captured copies of these manuals as the basis for their defences in 1918.

Both sides started the war with no doctrine to meet the situation in which they found themselves, and so had to start from scratch. The German defences went through a number of stages of development each increasing in complexity culminating in 'elastic defence' in 1917. Most of the pre-war tactical training of all the armies had been in the offensive, any thought of defence or retreat being considered bad for morale. In the Official History, Edmonds states: 'It has been held by authority that there are dangers in training troops in retreat, as it disposes them to retire'.⁹ With no experience to guide them, the Germans' first efforts were quite simple. In early 1915 General Falkenhayn, the German commander, ordered the construction of two lines of trenches some 200 yards apart with a reserve line 2000 yards to the rear. These proved effective against the unsophisticated Allied tactics of that stage of the war. By July 1916 on the Somme, this had increased to three lines and a depth of up to 6000 yards i.e. defence in depth. The battle would be fought in the front line and commanders who lost it were sacked, but the cost of this policy was high casualties. Although there may be some controversy over the method of counting, German losses on the Somme were comparable to those suffered by Britain and France.¹⁰

In late 1916 the Germans decided to build a series of reserve lines behind the front, for use in the event of an Allied break-through; the first to be tackled was the Hindenburg line behind the Somme battlefield.¹¹ The original plans for the Hindenburg line were to incorporate all that the Germans had learned to date. The front trench system was to be built on a reverse slope with belts of wire in front up to 100 yards deep, combined with concrete machine-gun positions and the artillery observation well back. The two officers responsible for tracing the line, General Lauter and Colonel Kraemer, did not pay much heed to this instruction and sited the trench lines according to the old system - on a crest or forward slope with the artillery observation in the front

⁹ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 481.

¹⁰ The Germans did not count lightly wounded, so a direct comparison of the figures was not possible. See Terraine, J, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-myths of War, 1861-1945* (London: Leo Cooper, 1992), p. 101.

¹¹ Called the Siegfried line by the Germans.

line. At the time von Lossberg was chief-of-staff of the German First Army (von Below) in whose area the line was being built. When von Lossberg noticed the faults he requested that the Army Group commander, Crown Prince Rupprecht, order the line to be reshaped by adding a new system some 2 - 3000 yards in front of the existing one which became the artillery protection line.¹² After an inspection of the situation by Rupprecht he sanctioned the change. The Somme battles left the Germans in such a poor defensive position that they decided to move back to the Hindenburg line in early 1917, completely devastating the area they vacated. As Wynne points out this was not so much a line as a position; when it was completed there were three sets of trench systems protected by wire up to 100 feet in depth.

The Germans gradually moved to the concept of defensive zones rather than lines of trenches. The Somme battles had showed that considerable depth of the defences was required; it was always possible for the enemy to capture a section of trench by the concentration of men and fire-power, but he would then be contained by the other defences. The enormous increase in Allied artillery meant that spreading out the defenders would reduce casualties and give greater freedom of movement and tactical flexibility. Trench lines became borders of the defensive zones and a place for the garrison to live in during quiet times. During a battle continuous pressure on the attacker came from the defended localities in each zone. It was this idea that was to give the British so much trouble during the winter of 1917/18.

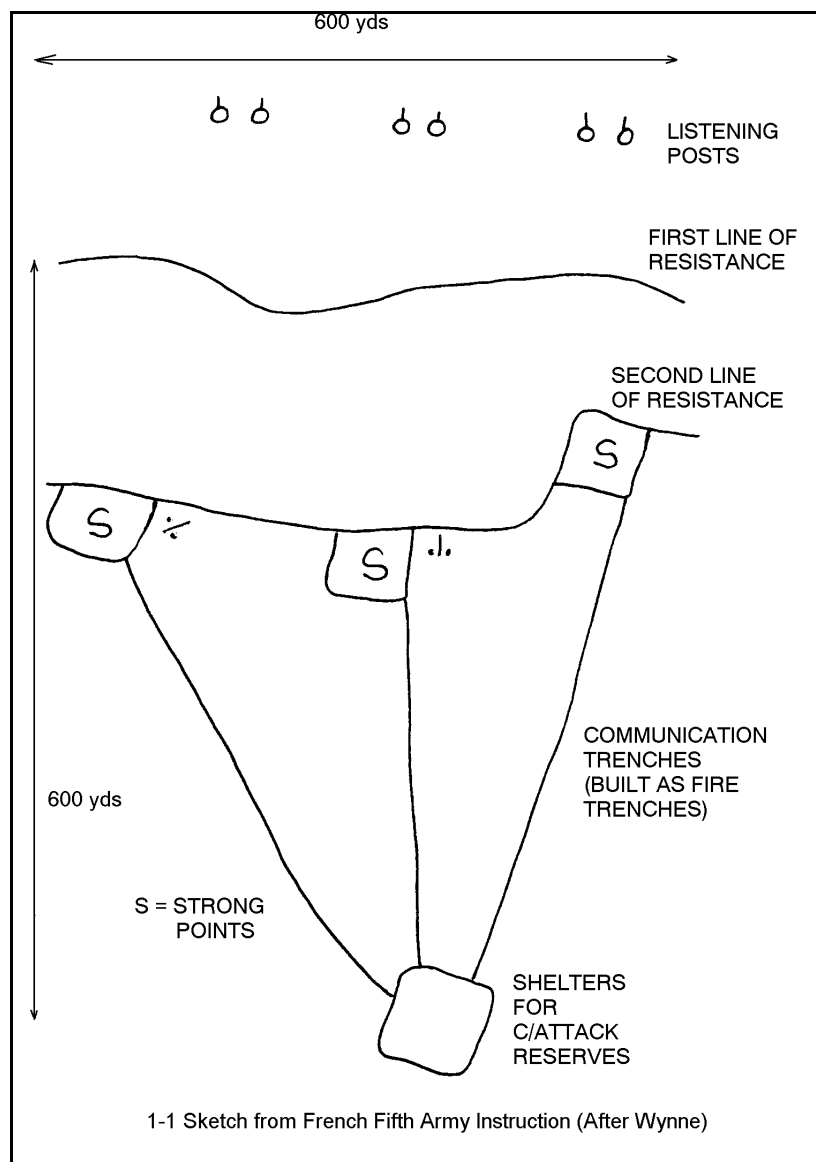
The development of doctrine did not stop there. Since 1915, the Operations Section had been considering an alternative to the rigid defence described above. In mid-1915 the Germans captured a document issued by the French Fifth Army (d'Esperey) which proposed a defensive scheme of three lines.¹³ The front line was to house sentry groups only, supporting a line of listening posts in no-man's-land. Behind this was the main line of defence comprising a trench line with small forts designed for all round fire. In the event of a German breakthrough these strong-points were to hold out until they could be relieved by a 'victorious counter-attack'. The third or support line housed the reserves in shell-proof shelters. Switch lines between the three lines were to be used to harass the advancing enemy. The Germans developed this idea into a more mobile doctrine. If the enemy accepted the 'invitation to walk right in',¹⁴ they

¹² While these defences were being constructed the two manuals were under discussion within the German Army.

¹³ Wynne, *If Germany Attacks*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 149. In German '*an-sich-herankommen-lassen*'.

would be harassed by the troops in the battle zone using counter-attacks and machine-gun fire. Deeper penetration would result in counter-attacks by the rear echelons. This concept was called elastic defence, the name coming from the idea of the front line being the elastic which when deformed by the force of the attack was sprung back by the counter-attack. This analogy, an unusual example of Newton's Third Law,¹⁵ may be taken a stage further. The force required to deform the elastic increases with depth of penetration into the battle zone, and consequently the stronger the counter-attack required to remove the attacker. It was this concept that was originally rejected by von Lossberg, who could not contemplate any loss of territory.



Elastic defence was first used on the Scarpe in April 1917. The Germans were

¹⁵ To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

unable to counter-attack after the Canadians had captured Vimy ridge because their reserves were held too far back, by the time they were ready it was too late.¹⁶ Again, von Lossberg was sent to the scene and became chief-of-staff of the Sixth Army (von Falkenhausen).¹⁷ He immediately saw that the good observation from the ridge made the front line untenable, thus the idea of holding it at all costs was impractical. He informed Ludendorff that he proposed a new front line about 3000 yards in front of the Wotan line - the equivalent of the Hindenburg line in this area - and proposed to fight an elastic defence within it. Thus, the man who vigorously opposed the idea, and would not even listen to the phrase 'elastic defence', was the first to put it into practice. This example was typical of the 'fireman of the Western Front' in action.¹⁸

Later in the year, when it became obvious that an attack in Flanders was imminent, von Lossberg became the chief-of-staff to the Fourth Army (von Arnim).¹⁹ The flatness of the terrain meant that trenches on reverse slopes and artillery observation on the next ridge were not possible; so, he decided to rely on a more rigid defence in depth rather than the purely elastic defence. The counter-attack would now be even more important and the Germans could try out the new storm-troops, which were becoming available.

The counter-attack was a central feature of all the versions of the German doctrine. During an enemy offensive the attackers were to be continuously harassed by small arms fire from prepared positions supported by counter-attacks by the local supports. The timing of the counter-attack was important. If the enemy penetrated into the battle zone, a point was reached when the attackers no longer had the support of their creeping barrage and become disorientated by their unfamiliar surroundings and the continuous German fire. The attack would then begin to falter and this was the ideal time to launch a major counter-attack, before the enemy could dig in and consolidate their gains. As with most other human endeavours, the reality did not always match the plan; the Germans soon found that continuously throwing in more and more troops only increased the casualty figures for little gain, so the concept of the 'counter-attack after preparation' was developed. They were willing to allow the enemy to hold onto their gains, until the artillery and infantry plans were made, and perhaps more reserves

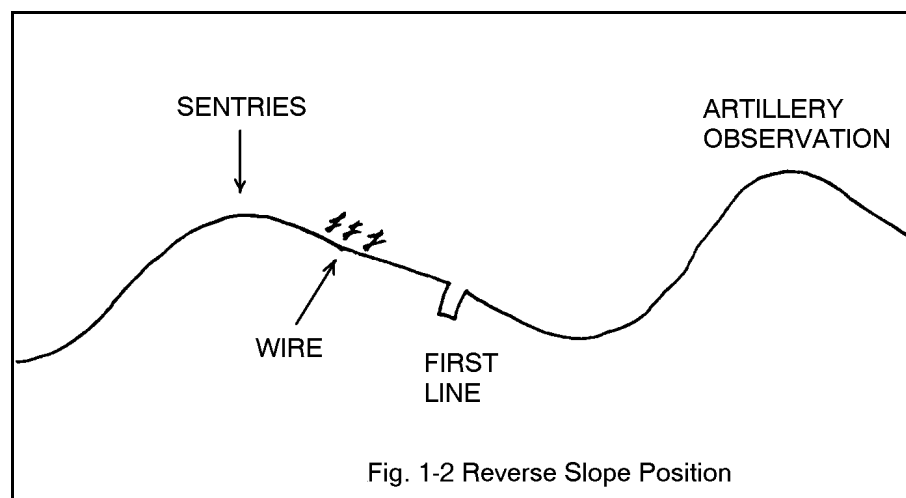
¹⁶ Wynne, 'Defensive Battle, Part II', *Army Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIV, No.2 (July 1937), p. 254. There was confusion in the German command about who 'owned' the counter-attack divisions. The divisions thought themselves part of the defensive system, whereas corps considered them their reserves.

¹⁷ Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine*, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

brought up. One example of this was the counter-attack after the British advance at Cambrai in November 1917 when, using massed tanks for the first time, they breached the Hindenburg line.²⁰ The Germans, having no local reserves, took eight days to get their artillery and infantry into position, re-taking most of the British gains.

The Germans used many innovations in their defensive doctrine, some being adaptations of existing ideas, others new. While no new technology was developed for the defensive, existing arms were used in different ways as the doctrine progressed. In some cases, they reversed the traditional thinking, which required changes to existing methods and training. Change in any large organisation, especially when existing doctrine is involved, is difficult. This was one of the Germans' great achievements, so it is worth looking at a number of examples.



In positional warfare high ground is all important; since it gives good observation, trenches drain well and enemy attacks have to be made up hill, both sides conducted local offensives to gain such positions. The Second Battle of Ypres was an example of the Germans mounting an offensive with limited objectives to gain the Pilckem ridge, which commands an excellent view over the Flanders plain. The first line of trenches was usually placed on the forward slope, facing the enemy. This gave a wide field of fire and continuous observation of the enemy, but the increase in Allied firepower made this position untenable. Colonel von Lossberg, after some experience against the French in Champagne, proposed placing the front line on the reverse slope

¹⁹ The position he held during the Battles of the Lys.

²⁰ Cambrai is used a number of times in this section as an example because it was a tactical turning point in the war, the first major use of tanks by the British and storm troops by the Germans.

with a sentry line on the crest to give warning of an enemy attack. It was found that placing the forward trenches 200 yards from the crest gave a sufficient field of fire to halt any enemy advance. Situated out of sight of the opposing artillery, any bombardment would have to rely on aircraft for observation, usually a slow process. Although first used in 1915, this concept took a long time to be accepted; it has already been pointed out that the original layout of the Hindenburg line placed the front trenches on a forward slope until the intervention of von Lossberg.

Many different permutations of the positions for the various arms making up a defensive scheme were tried. The front-line garrison was decreased, the infantry being moved further back to decrease the casualties from the enemy artillery. These troops were then available for use in counter-attacks and could live in relative comfort. The idea of rigid lines was superseded by zones - outpost, battle and rear. The front line became an area of joined up fortified shell holes which, by increasing the area the enemy artillery had to bombard, gave some relief to the foremost troops. As the defensive battle became more a fight for the battle zone, the machine-guns moved from the front line into the battle zone and then to the rear lines in front of the artillery. At the same time the artillery observation was moved out of the front line, since it had been found that contact between the Forward Observation Officer (FOO) and his battery was often lost when the front line was bombarded, he became a casualty or his telephone lines cut. It was found that this rear location, especially when used with a reverse slope position, gave better observation, away from the smoke of the battle. The artillery became more important as a defensive weapon as the war progressed; the Germans began to position the artillery line first, then those for the infantry; and battery sites became defended areas in themselves, rather than lines of guns in the open. The positioning of reserves was experimented with; the further forward they were deployed, the quicker they could come into action. However, this could mean casualties and poor living conditions.

The pre-war German Army laid great store in the discipline and commitment of its soldiers, thus the order to hold the front line at all costs fitted into the culture. This idea was translated into slogans such as 'Hold on to whatever can be held'.²¹ The loss of ground was considered a propaganda gift to the enemy and often magnified beyond its worth. The problem with such ideals is that they can become expensive to maintain, as the Germans found on the Somme. Gradually they formed the concept of holding

ground for its tactical, rather than propaganda value. For instance, when evaluating the situation at the end of 1916, there was little hesitation in moving back to the Hindenburg position. Although the BEF may have had something to crow about when the Germans withdrew, they ended up facing an almost impregnable position for the gain of the devastated area.

In his article *The Chain of Command*²² Wynne pointed to the difficulty of passing orders quickly from corps to battalion. The figure of six hours is often mentioned, there were a number of instances of British troops waiting for orders when the Germans had retreated. All the belligerents has this problem, which is not surprising since their armies had similar structures, but the Germans made an effort to solve it. The function of some formations and units was changed during a battle. Battalions reported directly to divisions and divisions to the army thus bypassing brigade and corps. These latter two became suppliers of reinforcements and supplies.²³ At the end of the battle the command structure reverted to normal; today we would call this process 'delaying'. The role of the battalion commander became more important, as he was given responsibility for his section of the front as well as his men and might remain in position even if his unit was relieved. During the Battle of Passchendaele the Germans tried combining two divisions, one positioned immediately behind the other, but with one commander responsible for the front. The troops in the line could be rotated every four or five days to relieve the strain of battle, while reinforcements were immediately available in the event of an attack.

By the end of 1917, the German Army on the Western Front had had three years experience of the defensive battle, including the hard lessons learned from a number of mistakes. In developing their doctrine, they were able to call upon the analytical skill of a relatively few junior officers in the Operations Section, and the high command had Colonel von Lossberg. This development was not without friction; von Lossberg had first to be persuaded to accept the concept of elastic defence, and selling this idea within the army was a long job. However, it was this ability to innovate, either changing old ideas or introducing new ones, that gave the Germans their success in defence.

Changes to methods of working and responsibilities in any organisation are not made without conflict; the reasons for this can be complex, and many words have been

²¹ Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine*, p. 3.

²² Wynne, 'The Chain of Command', *Army Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVI, No.1, (April 1938).

²³ Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine*, p. 19.

written on the management of change. For the Germans, as with any army, there was an extra dimension: if they managed the introduction of new doctrine badly they could lose the war. There seem to have been two schools, the die-hards who favoured rigid defence and the progressives who were looking for new ideas to counteract the increasing tactical ability of the Allies. Wynne gives the impression that the German defensive doctrine developed with only a few objections or 'discussions' along the way. To anyone with experience of a large organisation trying to improve itself this is nonsense; as Lupfer has pointed out, 'there was still a universal distrust of higher headquarters and, in particular, of staff members, by German front-line officers and men'.²⁴ The contrary views started immediately Falkenhayn issued his instructions for the defensive in early 1915. His proposal for a rear line, that would be used if the front was breached, brought the opinion from Crown Prince Rupprecht that its presence would lessen the resolve of the defenders. Experience showed that this view was completely unfounded. The introduction of Ludendorff's textbook required his personal intervention: 'The controversy raged furiously on my staff; I myself had to take part and I advocated the new tactics.'²⁵ Even so, it took seven months to introduce.²⁶ Generals rarely give direct orders, but make suggestions or give instructions through their staff, who then see that these are carried out. On this occasion his rank and position were required to push the ideas through. As the Germans developed elastic defence the influence of the 'die-hards' did not diminish. The battle of Passchendaele is remembered by the British for its mud and failure to achieve its objective. Wynne's second article shows that the Germans had to revise their doctrine continuously during this battle as the British changed their tactics, relying more on limited objective offensives.²⁷ To counter this the Germans reverted to the doctrine of a much more heavily defended forward zone, which was a failure as it just provided more fodder for the British cannon.²⁸

There were a number of occasions when changes in BEF tactics, or mistakes by the Germans, gave the British an advantage. The most consistently successful tactic against the German defences was surprise; days of preliminary bombardment made the British intention obvious, enabling the Germans to move reserves into place and get

²⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁵ Ludendorff, E, *My War Memoirs*, (London: Hutchinson, 1919), Vol. I, p. 459.

²⁶ Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine*, p. 11.

²⁷ Wynne, 'Defensive Battle, Part II', *Army Quarterly*, Vol. XXXIV, No.2 (July 1937).

²⁸ Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine*, p. 35.

ready for a set piece defence. The attack on the Hindenburg position at Cambrai in November 1917 combined the use of massed tanks to breach the wire with a short artillery bombardment. As has already been mentioned, the Germans were unable to counter-attack immediately as there were no troops in position ready to be the spring in the elastic. However, the counter-attack after preparation eight days later regained most of their losses. It is interesting that Wynne hardly mentions this failure in his book. On another occasion, during the Battle of Arras in the spring of 1917, the Germans held their reserves too far back which enabled the British to make progress and consolidate their gains.

The use by the British of the German concept of defended localities was Wynne's main criticism of the BEF's defensive tactics, which will be discussed in the next chapter. The purpose of the troops in forward zone was to slow the advance of an attacker who broke through the front line. To achieve this the Germans placed sections or platoons in pill-boxes or machine-gun nests from where they could harass the enemy by fire. The defenders of these points of resistance were to hold out at all costs until relieved by the counter-attack; during the battle they would also act as rallying points for the front-line troops falling back. These small garrisons would be sacrificed if the counter-attack was not successful. One of the earliest forms of this part of the defences was a line of pillboxes a few hundred yards behind the foremost trenches. An example still exists on Aubers ridge opposite the line held by the Portuguese in April 1918. Situated about 100 yards from the crest of the ridge they could fire on any attacker who made it to the top. The rolling countryside of the Somme allowed these positions to be more easily disguised and thus hidden from aerial observation. In Flanders the Germans built concrete pill-boxes disguised with turf; during the latter stages of the Battle of Passchendaele, when the British used the limited objective offensives already mentioned, their garrisons were often sacrificed. The forward zone was captured, and the position consolidated by the British, before the German counter-attack could be launched. Thus the garrison was lost, and any strongpoints in the battle zone not used. However, the Germans continued to use this concept, and during the latter months of the war, many Allied attacks were against 'field positions consisting of fortified localities and trenches'.²⁹ In addition, the Germans often placed forward guns in these localities for use against tanks.

The German command structure gained considerable experience in defence

during the course of the war; this learning process, including the study of their mistakes, enabled them to increase the sophistication of their doctrine. We might consider that codifying their experience in a textbook was sufficient, since all commanders had to do was study it and make their dispositions accordingly. There was more to it than that. The textbook was a set of guidelines, more general than specific; it was for the user to apply it according to the ground and tactical situation in question, and to do this experience of the defensive battle was required.

The trench fortifications of the Western Front gave as many problems to the attacker as the defender; in particular, machine-guns and artillery had made the offensive almost impossible by the direct assault of massed infantry. The three main difficulties to be overcome during an attack were: suppression of the defender by accurate artillery fire in order to cross no-man's-land; the lack of artillery support once in the enemy defences and the creeping barrage had gone; and keeping the offensive moving so that the enemy had no opportunity to consolidate a new line. The Allied answer to this was the tank, while the Germans concentrated on infiltration techniques, which we know under the evocative name of storm-troop tactics, part of an offensive doctrine that embraced both the infantry and artillery.

The tactics used by the Germans in 1918, which partly solved the problems mentioned above, had their origin in the thoughts of a French infantry officer, André Laffargue. He published the results of his deliberations in a pamphlet *The Attack in Trench Warfare*,³⁰ a copy of which the Germans captured in the early summer of 1916. Lupfer summarised Laffargue's ideas as:

... a sudden attack to achieve deep penetration. His attack resembled a gulp, not a nibble. The momentum of the in-depth attack would disrupt the enemy, keep him off balance, and prevent him from organising an effective response. To capitalise on disruption, the assault had to advance as fast as possible. The first wave would identify - not reduce - defensive strongpoints and subsequent attack waves would destroy them. An artillery bombardment applied suddenly in depth throughout the enemy area would precede the infantry assault. Disruption of enemy artillery batteries was particularly important to protect the infantry advance.³¹

This is immediately recognisable as 'storm-troop tactics' as practised on the 21 March 1918. The refined ideas were published in a manual *The Attack in Position Warfare* on

²⁹ Official History, 1918, Vol. V, p. 574.

³⁰ Wynne, *If Germany Attacks*, p. 57.

³¹ Lupfer, *Dynamics of Doctrine*, p. 39.

1 January 1918.

The long artillery barrages used to soften up the defences often fell short of the desired effect. Shrapnel and high-explosive were poor cutters of wire; while the latter might destroy the enemy earthworks a devastated area was created that made the progress of both men and vehicles difficult. Surprise in the form of an accurate short bombardment, followed up by infantry under the protection of a 'creeper', gave much better results and had been proved by the Germans in the East. The traditional method of ranging an artillery piece was by registration, i.e. firing at the enemy and observing the fall of shot. However, the firing in this manner of the large number of guns required for a major offensive soon gave warning of an attack to the enemy. An artilleryman, Captain Pulkowsky, developed a method of accurate firing without registration by calibrating each gun away from the front and tabulating the data including the effects of external factors such as the weather. Again, the idea had to be proved before it was accepted. Lupfer quotes the experiences of a German gunner at Pulkowsky's school, where over six thousand officers and men were trained in this method. His initial scepticism gave way to acclaim, but only after he had seen the result of the new tactic.³² This scientific artillery was not new, it had been the basis of all naval gunnery since the end of the last century. It is strange that writers often seem reluctant to credit the BEF with a similar development.³³

The prelude to any offensive on the Western Front was the artillery bombardment, often lasting for several days, which was supposed to destroy the enemy defences in order to pave the way for the infantry advance. The main disadvantage of this was that any element of surprise was lost. The enemy was given time to mass resources behind the front, out of range of the field artillery, ready to counter-attack as soon as the barrage lifted. At Riga, in late 1917, the Germans had experimented with a short hurricane bombardment developed by von Hutier's artillery adviser, Lieut.-Colonel Bruchmüller, who was transferred with von Hutier to the Western Front. The first period of two hours was directed against the enemy artillery and command structure in the rear. The ratio of 4.5:1 in favour of gas shell shows that the emphasis was on the personnel rather than buildings or defence lines. For the next three hours, the concentration was against the defences in the front area and their garrison, the ratio of

³² Ibid., pp. 47-48.

³³ One of the best recent studies which gives the BEF full credit for its innovations is: Griffith, P: *Battle Tactics Of The Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916 - 18* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

gas to high explosive shell being 1:1. For the last five minutes, most fire was concentrated against the forward zone. At zero hour the attacking infantry, who had meanwhile crept forward into no-man's-land, would rush the forward defences, hopefully overcoming the dazed defenders. At the same time, a creeping barrage would move forward to a pre-set timetable. The field artillery, which provided most of this 'creeper', was to be as far forward as possible to give the maximum depth of protection to the infantry. Experience had shown that it was very easy for the leading troops to lose the barrage if they were held up by one of the multitude of things that could go wrong. To counter this flares were issued to the storm-troops so that the artillery observers might judge their positions.

There are many instances in the Great War of advances being held up by a few strategically placed enemy machine-gun nests that had survived the bombardment and which could only be overcome by direct assault, resulting in considerable loss of life. The infantry had only rifles and grenades to use in such situations, while what was required was a heavier weapon that could suppress the defenders' fire until the infantry could get close. The Germans first tried a 37mm cannon which was not successful and was replaced by captured Russian 76.2mm field guns which were stripped down to make them lighter and mounted on a skid.³⁴ Similar arrangements were made for trench mortars and machine-guns, and together these weapons gave the German infantry their own mobile firepower.

It is strange that the Germans did not develop an efficient light machine-gun similar to the Lewis gun used very effectively by the British infantry. Throughout the war they relied on captured equipment or an adaptation of their existing Maxim heavy machine-gun. Their first effort, the Bergman, introduced in 1915, had a tendency to jam. In mid-1916 they started to use Madsens which were of Danish manufacture, that had been captured from the Russians and re-chambered to take the standard 7.62mm rifle round; captured Lewis guns suffered a similar fate.³⁵ Since the German Maxim was difficult to move about due to its heavy tripod mounting and water container, a version was made with a wooden stock and bipod mount after some troops had been slow to evacuate their bunkers during the Somme campaign, but this was hardly a mobile weapon, although it was used until the end of the war.³⁶ Given the lack of

³⁴ Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics*, pp. 46-48.

³⁵ Similarly, the British rifles and machine-guns fired the same .303" bullet.

³⁶ Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics*, p. 99.

German offensives on the Western Front, the captured guns and the lightened Maxim may have been sufficient in defence and thus a better weapon considered unnecessary.

The storm-troop idea was developed by a Captain Reddmann, a pioneer officer, from the pre-war concept of *Jaeger* battalions who were recruited mainly from mountainous regions. Initially a flame-thrower section, an early solution to the problem of taking extra fire-power across no-man's-land, they were used first against the French at Malancourt north of Verdun in February 1916 with great success. This gave the impetus for expansion into the rest of the army and the existing *Jaeger* units were converted into assault battalions at a school set up at Beauville east of Verdun. The school's commander, Captain Rohr, developed specific assault tactics for use by these troops. Gone were the waves of infantry trying to cross no-man's-land before the machine-guns got them. Instead small groups were to crawl to as near the enemy as possible before making the final rush. Once in the enemy trenches they were to keep the attack moving by avoiding any centres of resistance, which were to be left for the orthodox infantry to deal with, and exploit the weak spots signalling these with flares. The mountains of equipment that the infantry of those days were expected to carry into battle were dispensed with and replaced with a sack of grenades, a few days hard rations and a carbine. Lace-up boots were found to be better than jack-boots and leather patches were sewn onto the uniform knees and elbows to facilitate crawling. Body armour was experimented with but found to be too cumbersome and was soon discarded, although steel helmets were retained.³⁷ These troops were first used in the West for the German counter-attack at Cambrai and their success gave their commanders the confidence to use specially trained assault troops during the Spring Offensives in 1918.

Ludendorff conceived the idea that all infantry should be modelled on this pattern, but the quality of replacements reaching the army in 1917 did not allow this, and not all the men were mentally suitable for the tough training. Instead about one quarter of his troops were converted into assault divisions and spent the winter of 1917/18 training, while the remainder were designated trench divisions and were left to garrison the front.

The armistice on the Eastern Front meant that the Germans, by transferring troops to the West, would have a numerical advantage during the first half of 1918. After then, the

arrival of the Americans would swing the manpower pendulum in the Allies favour. Thus, the spring of 1918 would be the one chance the Germans had for a war-winning offensive. There were three choices for the initial attack: Flanders, Picardy or Verdun, each with its advantages and disadvantages. After much deliberation, they chose Picardy as the place where the new combination of an intense artillery barrage followed by infantry infiltration would be tried against the Allies on a large scale.

The German planning for the Spring Offensives started on the 11 November 1917, when a conference was held at Crown Prince Rupprecht's headquarters in Mons. It was attended by Ludendorff, the chiefs-of-staff of the two northern Army Groups General von Kuhl and Colonel von der Schulenberg, together with various officers of the General Staff including Colonel Wetzell, head of the Operations Section. The object of the conference was to decide which of the Allies to attack and where, should the situation in Italy and particular Russia be decided to their advantage. Russia was causing Ludendorff considerable concern at this time; while its gradual collapse during 1917 would allow divisions to be released for service in the West, the unstable political situation meant that hostilities could easily break out again. However, these fears were proved groundless, when the Bolsheviks sued for peace in December 1917 and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in the following March took Russia out of the war and released even more troops than had previously been anticipated.³⁸ By 21 March 1918, the Germans increased their strength in the West from 150 divisions in November 1917 by an aggregate of 42 divisions³⁹ - some divisions were sent from west to east. By the end of April this had risen to 206 divisions.⁴⁰

The result of the conference was a choice of three places for the offensive: Verdun against the French and St. Quentin or Hazebrouck against the British. Although various plans were already in existence for such offensives, no final decision was made, Ludendorff preferring to wait and see how the overall situation developed. At this time the resources available to the Germans allowed for only one offensive with which to win the war, but the Russian bonus was to give Ludendorff greater strategic flexibility. This new situation was reflected in a paper prepared by Colonel Wetzell entitled *The*

³⁷ The Germans were slower than the British to adopt protective headgear.

³⁸ Although the negotiations dragged on, the armistice allowed the Germans to reduce manpower on this front.

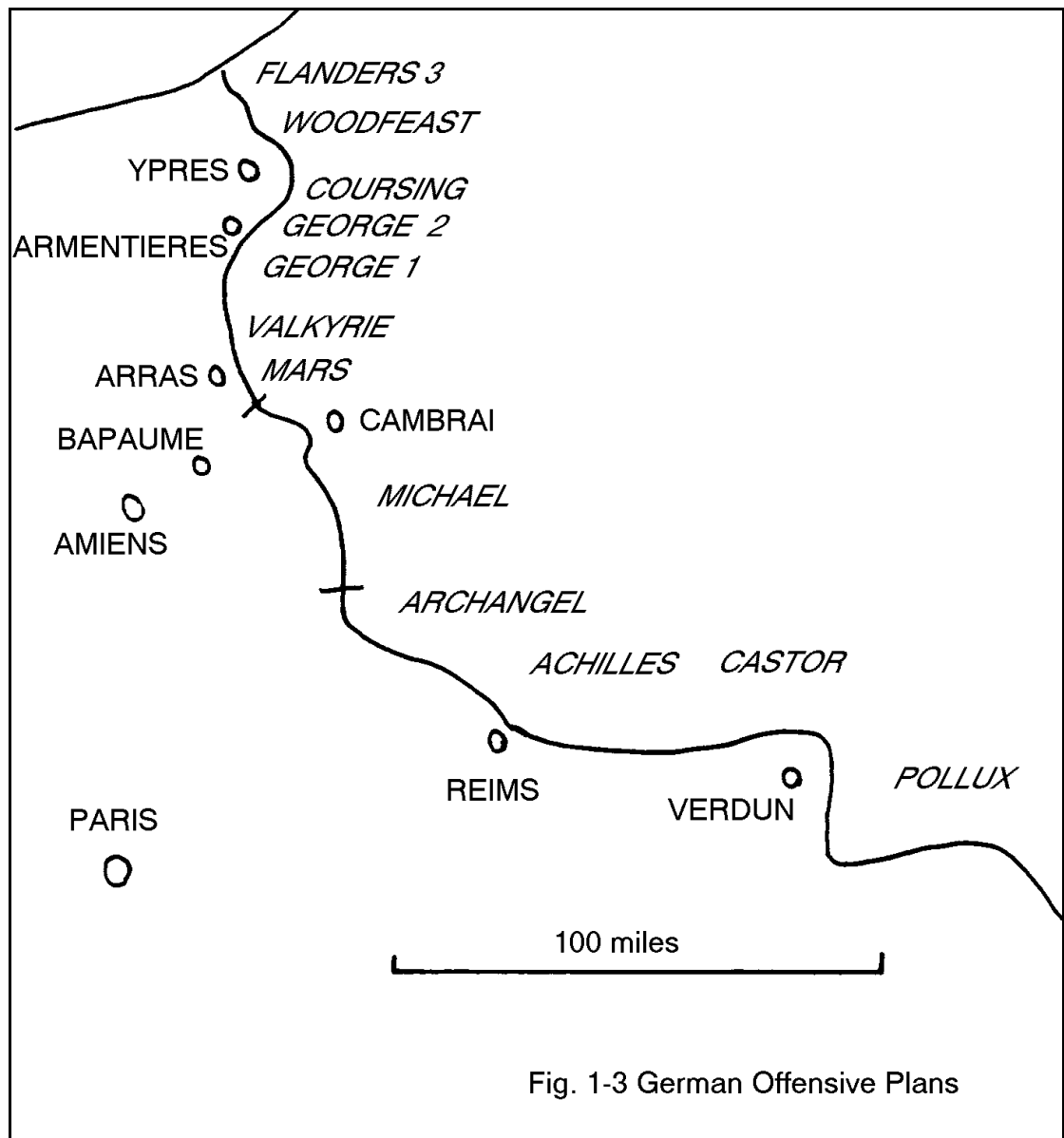
³⁹ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 142.

⁴⁰ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 438.

*Offensive in the West and its Prospect of Success*⁴¹ which summarised the ideas of the various staffs and set out the courses open to the Germans. Wetzell concluded that an attack against the British gave the greatest chance of success, although he did not fully explain why he rejected the French option. At some time, these offensive plans were given 'heroic' code names. Wetzell's views on the strengths and weaknesses of the French and British probably played a large part in his decision making. He felt that although the British had 'suffered very severely' in Flanders they had enough trained replacements to continue the offensive in 1918. Tied to Flanders the British were a 'strategically clumsy, tactically rigid, but tough enemy'. The French Army on the other hand was 'rested, tactically more skilful and strategically free'. This is perhaps why he preferred the British option.

The main tactical theme of Wetzell's argument was that one blow was not sufficient to give victory; rather a series of attacks would have to be made, each drawing in the enemy reserves until finally the line would break. He was concerned that if Germany attacked one of the Allies, the other would start an offensive to relieve the pressure. To counter this he suggested an attack on Verdun which could be made in February when the British sector of the front, especially Flanders, would be unsuitable for a counter-offensive. He considered that the French would not recover, either politically or militarily, from such a battle. Against the British he preferred an attack on Hazebrouck, an important railway centre, which would threaten the Channel Ports. However, realising that good road and rail communications behind the Allied front would enable them to easily move reinforcements, he concluded that it was better to strike at both enemies at once in the St. Quentin area, where the French and British sectors joined, followed by an attack in Flanders towards Hazebrouck. The former battle had the disadvantage that it would have to be fought over the devastated area, vacated by the Germans on their move back to the Hindenburg Line.

⁴¹ Reproduced in the appendix volume to the Official History, 1918, Vol. I, pp, 130-5.



Even though this would probably be more advantageous to the defender, and could bring any breakthrough to a halt, they decided to adopt this compromise option. The objectives of the St. Quentin attack were to cut off the British forces in the Flesquières salient⁴² and weaken the armies in Flanders by forcing them to send reserves south. The battle was to be closed down once the front Bapaume - Combles - Peronne - Ham - La Fère had been reached. The Hazebrouck attack, a pincer movement around Armentières was to 'set the whole British front tottering and then roll it up from the north.'⁴³ Broadly speaking this was the strategy adopted by the Germans, although it took many more conferences to refine the detail. However, the above shows that there was no

⁴² Known to the Germans as the Cambrai Salient.

perfect option.

This assessment shows that the Germans had no appreciation of the real state of the Allied armies: the British manpower crisis and the questionable state of the morale of the French Army, perhaps one of the best kept secrets of the war. Wetzell missed another factor concerning the French - the psychological importance of Paris - only sixty miles from the front line. Although there was a vast area for manoeuvre behind their front any attack on the left flank of the French line would immediately threaten the capital, rekindling memories of 1870. As they swung their left flank to protect Paris, touch would be lost with the British Fifth Army and a gap inviting exploitation created. While the Germans might inflict a heavy defeat on the BEF and force them to retire south, or form a box around the Channel Ports, the Royal Naval blockade would remain while there was a political will to continue the war. Of course, the permutations are endless, but Wetzell does seem to have taken a rather simplistic view of what might happen.

Over the winter months as the political situation in the East released more and more troops for the western offensives. The Germans were able to refine their plans until they had a strategy that they considered had every chance of success. The first great blow would be the St. Michael attack in the south, followed by St. George in Flanders towards Hazebrouck, against a weakened northern sector that would separate the British from the Channel Ports, thus bringing the whole front crashing down like a house of cards.⁴⁴ The Michael attack would be by three armies, each with a specific task. The Eighteenth Army (von Hutier) was to separate the British from the French and then stop along the Somme - Crozat Canal and act as a bastion against any interference from the rest of the French Army.⁴⁵ The Second Army (von der Marwitz) was to drive on Albert, then swing north; while the southern part of the Seventeenth Army (von Below) advanced to Bapaume and likewise turned north. At this point the remainder of the Seventeenth Army would undertake the Mars South scheme and attack towards Arras.

The Germans had a number of schemes prepared for the northern sector with the overall code-name George. George I was an attack between the La Bassée canal and

⁴³ Official History, 1918, Vol. I Appendix, p. 134.

⁴⁴ The 'Saint' seems to have been optional, it will now be omitted for the sake of clarity. St. Michael is the patron saint of Germany and the warrior archangel, while St. George, besides his English connections is the patron saint of soldiers.

⁴⁵ The extension of the British line meant that the whole attack would be against the Gough's Fifth Army.

Armentières towards Hazebrouck, while George II was divided into three. 'Hare Drive' or 'Coursing' against Messines ridge and 'Woodfeast' north of Ypres which would pinch out the town and the Salient; and 'Flanders 3' against the Belgians on the Channel coast. The original plan was to launch all these attacks simultaneously a few days after the start of Michael. However, in the event this was not possible.

Meanwhile, British GHQ at Montreuil had been trying to work out the German intentions, and to keep them guessing the Germans undertook a series of deceptions during the winter of 1917/18. The great advantage of this strategy was that it was bound to have some success, as whatever interpretation was put on information received from the Germans, seeds of doubt could always be sown.

At the Army level supply dumps were created by the Germans, both real and false, and light railways and roads constructed. Artillery activity flared up and died down and individual guns conducted ranging shoots all along the front. Up and down the front batteries would fire a few ranging shots at night and then move back, leaving behind a poorly camouflaged dummy.⁴⁶ The Allied spotter plane sent over the next day would report this and the artillery would fire on the area, only for a new 'battery' to appear nearby a few days later. All these preparations were reported to GHQ in Army Intelligence Summaries which showed that in March 1918 each army considered an attack imminent on their front!

Perhaps the greatest coup in this disinformation campaign was the release of a captive balloon over the French lines on 20 March containing papers that pointed to an attack near Reims on the 26th.⁴⁷ The French were completely deceived by this ploy to the extent that they were unwilling to send troops to the BEF's aid as they expected to be attacked themselves. To give the deception even more credibility the Germans increased their artillery activity, and conducted a number of heavy raids against the French during the night of 20-21st and the following day. Another rumour that fooled the French was the possibility of a German attack through Switzerland, on which Colonel Hankey, the Cabinet Secretary, commented: 'GHQ considered this 'inherently improbable'.⁴⁸ He went on to claim that the French moved thirty-two divisions to cover these eventualities - seventeen for the former and fifteen for the latter. Perhaps the most fanciful of all the schemes floated by the Germans was the raid on the East

⁴⁶ Westman, S, *Surgeon with the Kaiser's Army* (London: Kimber, 1968), p. 154. It is unclear whether this was hearsay or personal knowledge.

⁴⁷ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 154 fn.

⁴⁸ Hankey, Lord, *The Supreme Command 1914-18* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), Vol. II, p. 807.

Coast of England which forced the British to keep troops at home.

The new science of wireless was also involved. By the use of dummy wireless traffic 'a whole German Army was impersonated successfully on the French Front.'⁴⁹ By 1918, both sides were using wireless extensively in the forward areas as artillery fire easily interrupted wired communications. This traffic could easily be interrupted by the generation of interference, 'it is not too much to say that the German wireless sets in the 1918 offensive put down what can only be described as a wireless barrage.'⁵⁰

Phrases such as 'Teutonic thoroughness' have been rather overworked in the description of all things German, but the history of their development of doctrine during the Great War shows why such plaudits exist. They successfully defended their position against an increasingly tactically sophisticated BEF, and developed a system of attack that would break through the British defences and capture the largest area of territory of the whole war. There were a number of reasons for the German success. According to Lupfer, the it was German Army system, especially the feeding back of ideas to the Operations Section which exposed its members to the experience of the front line commanders. Wynne favoured the 'evil genius' in the form of Colonel von Lossberg who became Ludendorff's peripatetic defence expert. Both views have some substance, doctrine does not disseminate by itself, for no matter how august the author may be, someone is required who can put the words into practice and clear away the objections. Also, the German Army placed great reliance on devolved battlefield leadership, which allowed their assault troops to operate in small squad sized groups which gave a high degree of motivation and tactical flexibility.

Meanwhile, the British had not been idle; the next chapter will look at their preparations for the coming battle.

⁴⁹ Ferris, J (ed.), *The British Army and Signals Intelligence During the First World War* (Stroud: Sutton for the Army Records Society, 1992), pp. 81-2.

⁵⁰ Cousins, A, 'Development of Army Wireless During the War', *Journal of the Institution of Electrical Engineers*, Vol. 59, 1920-1, p. 769.

Chapter 2

THE BRITISH PREPARATIONS

Until 1918 the BEF had never experienced a major assault by the Germans. All the previous attacks had limited objectives; for example, the use of the ‘ungentlemanly novelty’¹ of gas at Second Ypres in April 1915, was to enable Pilckem ridge in front of Ypres to be taken, thus improving the German observation of the Salient. Similarly, large trench raids had the objective of enhancing the position of the line, or recapturing ground lost during a British attack.

The change in emphasis, from offence to defence by the BEF at the end of 1917 was quite sudden. This chapter will concentrate on the northern two Armies as they were the ones involved in the battle. The First and Fourth Armies settled in for the winter expecting a resumption of the offensive in the spring of 1918.² The winter being a time for consolidation; trench raids were to be continued to maintain the offensive spirit of the troops. By early December the talk was all of defence and training. For example, the Second Army *Organisation of the Army Front during Winter 1917-18*,³ dated 24 October 1917, looked forward to a resumption of the Flanders offensive in the spring; whereas *Basis for the Second Army Defences*,⁴ dated 18 December, sets out the defensive preparations to be made during the next three months. Any further offensives on the part of the Allies would have to wait until 1919, when there would be sufficient trained Americans in France to tip the manpower balance.

Previous studies have looked at the British use of captured German manuals in an endeavour to develop a doctrine. It has been shown that the exercise was bungled as GHQ did not interpret these manuals correctly.⁵ There has also been a concentration on the role of the infantry in these defensive schemes. While this was obviously important,

¹ Liddell Hart, B, *History of the First World War* (London: Papermac Edition, 1992), p. 186.

² The Second Army staff went with General Plumer to the Italian Front during the winter of 1917/18 and were replaced by the Fourth Army staff under General Rawlinson. The actual dates were: 9-11-17 Second Army front taken over by GOC and staff of Fourth Army, 20-12-17 Second Army designated Fourth Army, 13-3-18 All units under Fourth Army became Second Army, 17-3-18 Fourth Army renamed Second Army.

³ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd MSS, Folder 59, Appendix 28.

⁴ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd MSS, Folder 60, Appendix 82.

⁵ For example: Samuels, *Doctrine and Dogma*.

it has been shown in the last chapter that the artillery and lines of communications also had important parts to play. While many of the criticisms are valid, any judgement has to take into account the situation the BEF found itself in at the end of 1917. The task was a daunting one; within under three months, the BEF had to work out and implement defence schemes that would defeat a numerically superior enemy, whose offensive tactics were at least on a par with their own. The BEF's level of knowledge of defence may be compared with the Germans' in 1915; there was three years of experience to catch up on, so their only recourse was to turn to captured documents.

The main difficulty facing the BEF in the winter of 1917/18 was a shortage of manpower, more specifically Class A men for the infantry and artillery. Also, the British Army suffered from a shortage of trained officers and NCOs throughout the whole war. Whatever the BEF decided to do, this problem would always be with them. This chapter will look at the problems facing the BEF, and the way in which they were tackled, and assess their performance against this broader canvas.

The BEF always had some sort of manpower crisis. At the beginning of the war it was a shortage of skilled men, expanding the army ten-fold in two years created a lack of experienced men in every branch of the service. As the war went on, there was a shortage of drafts to replace the casualties of 1916 and 17. The employment of women in industry and commerce did not wholly fill the gaps created by the men who went to the war, so we may say that the manpower crisis started when it was not over by Christmas 1914. It is easy to criticise the politicians for not doing something earlier, but they, like the military, were unprepared for total war. The idea of controlling or directing the working population was quite foreign, even anathema, to British culture, so they had to learn the lessons the hard way, by experience, in the same way as the army. Although by mid-1917 the country's manpower resources were under control of the Ministry of National Service, headed by Sir Auckland Geddes, there were just not enough men to fulfil all the nation's requirements of industry and the services, so the BEF had to accept a smaller slice of a shrinking cake. There were in fact two cakes, the total manpower available and that within the army. The infantry was not the only arm requiring men; the artillery, machine-gun companies, tanks and the RFC all had a call on the army's pool of manpower.

There is a myth, still often quoted, that Lloyd George kept an army at home to

the detriment of the BEF.⁶ Professor David Woodward has deconstructed the legend and shown that it was the Army Council who kept these men at home rather than the politicians.⁷ There were a number of reasons, not all military, for this decision: concealing them from the enemy, civilian morale, their ability to spend their money at home rather than abroad, and the fear of an invasion, a result of the German deception campaign mentioned in the previous chapter. An attack on the East Coast was considered a real threat at the time, although it would have been a risky venture for the Germans. Invasion scare books, a genre of ‘ripping yarn’ that does not exist today, were popular reading before the war and may have coloured the planners’ thinking.⁸

The lack of reinforcements meant that, at the end of 1917, most infantry and artillery units were under establishment, which impaired their fighting efficiency. This also had an impact on the construction of defences, as the divisions did most of the work at the front. The only answer was a re-organisation that would bring the units up to strength. Haig suggested reducing the number of divisions and redistributing the men, which was politically unacceptable as, divisions being the currency of any army, it would appear to be a reduction in the British commitment to the war effort. Instead, it was decided to reduce the number of infantry battalions per brigade from four to three, bring the infantry remaining battalions up to strength, and use the surplus as entrenching battalions. The Empire divisions, by breaking up holding battalions in the UK, were able to keep their twelve infantry battalions per division. No Guards battalions were disbanded and the three surplus were formed into the 4th Guards Brigade, which was sent to the 31st Division. In all, 141 battalions were broken up, a move which does not seem to have been popular with anyone. There are many accounts of mock funerals, and the poor welcome received by both the officers and men in their new units.⁹

Similar re-organisations had been made in the French and German Armies, but extra divisional artillery had been provided to compensate for the reduction in infantry fire power. Also, the change had been easier to accomplish as their brigades comprised three battalion regiments, so all that was required was the removal of one regiment. However, Army commanders had many batteries of field guns and heavier pieces which

⁶ Middlebrook, M, *The Kaiser's Battle. 21 March 1918: The First Day of the German Spring Offensive* (London: Penguin Edition, 1983), p. 25 for instance

⁷ Woodward, DR, ‘Did Lloyd George Starve the British Army of men prior to the German Offensive of 21st March 1918?’, *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (1984), pp. 241-252.

⁸ For example, in ‘The Riddle of the Sands’ by Erskine Childers, published in 1903, two Englishmen discover the Germans practising for an invasion behind the cover of the Fresian Islands.

⁹ Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, p. 87.

they could allot to divisions as and when required, which was a better use of resources. At the same time, the organisation of the Vickers machine-guns within a division was changed. Previously, each infantry brigade had its own machine-gun company, and these were now combined into a battalion, with one extra company added from reserves in the UK, at the disposal of the divisional commander.¹⁰ Although this increased the number of machine-guns in a division by twenty-five percent, it was not a popular move with brigade commanders. There may have been a certain amount of pique in this - brigadier-generals could see their establishment decreasing. In reality the machine-gun companies were allocated by division to brigades with one held in reserve. The Lewis gun remained an infantry weapon within the battalions.

In comparison with their French allies, the BEF did very badly when it came to home leave. In the Official History, Edmonds quotes the figures of 80,000¹¹ British, against 350,000 French¹² being on leave during March. We might question why so many men were allowed to be away from their units at this critical time. The BEF had taken a risk, which given the build-up of leave allowance, and the hard work done by the troops, was a reasonable one. The German offensive was not expected until April, when the ground would be dry enough to support the heavy transport, and home leave was important for the maintenance of morale.

In January 1918 Haig's manpower problems were increased when he was instructed to extend his line a further twenty-five miles to the south to fulfil a promise made to the French by Lloyd George the previous year. At the same time only three extra divisions were allocated to the Fifth Army. At a meeting of the Supreme War Council in early February a further extension as far as the River Ailette was proposed, but it was left to Haig and Pétain to agree the time and method of the transfer.¹³ No action was ever taken as Pétain had already informed Haig that he 'would not worry him further, the matter being rather political - raised by Clemenceau in the hope of extorting more men from England - than purely military.'¹⁴ Although Haig may have kept more divisions in the north to protect his lines of communication and left Gough to be reinforced by the French, his apparent parsimony towards the Fifth Army had more to do with his confidence in the BEF's defences. He wrote in his diary on 2 March:

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 89.

¹¹ Four percent of the BEF.

¹² Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 39 fn.

¹³ This body is discussed in a later chapter.

¹⁴ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, pp. 78-9.

I also told Army Commanders that I was very pleased at all I had seen on the fronts of the three Armies which I had recently visited. Plans were sound and thorough, and much work had already been done. I was only afraid that the enemy would find our front so very strong that he will hesitate to commit his Army to the attack with the almost certainty of losing very heavily.¹⁵

Even so, this still left Gough in a weak position, for the other three Armies had approximately one division for every two miles of front, whereas his had to cover three. Although Gough was allocated three cavalry divisions to act as a reserve, when fighting dismounted, they were each only equivalent to one infantry brigade. There were eight divisions in GHQ reserve evenly distributed behind the Armies. Haig considered that the BEF could hold out for eighteen days.¹⁶ So there was ample time to bring over the Mobile Reserve from Britain, or move up French reserves as the 'General Reserve' plan was dead.¹⁷ This apparent complacency may have been the result of Haig's experience of the offensive during 1916-17.

To compound the problem for the BEF Haig had lost the confidence of the Cabinet. His lack of a war-winning victory in 1916 and more especially in 1917 coupled with the high level of casualties made the Western Front look a poor bet for victory in 1918. Lloyd George would dearly have liked to dismiss Haig, but his own weak position, Haig's influential body of friends including the king, plus the lack of an obvious replacement, meant that Haig kept his job. The Government was faced with a problem to which there was no solution that satisfied everyone. Unfortunately for the politicians, and especially Lloyd George, the BEF was able to use the fact that they did not receive the reinforcements it demanded to excuse their poor performance in the Spring Offensives. Thus grew the legend that Lloyd George had starved Haig of men. The army and their supporters having fired the first salvoes, who would believe the denials of a politician during the 'war of the memoirs' in the inter-war years?

The manpower problem existed at two levels: political and within the army. The BEF, and particularly Haig, lost the battle for more men because their masters lacked confidence in them. At the operational level the BEF made the best of what they had and completed the building of their defences probably at the expense of training and leave.

¹⁵ Blake, Lord (ed.), *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952), p. 291.

¹⁶ Woodward, DR, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Press, 1983), p. 238.

¹⁷ The forming of an Allied reserve was one of the proposals of the SWC.

The BEF had given no thought to a defensive doctrine, so as a first step GHQ adopted what might be considered a typically British method - they formed a committee. This was mentioned by both Wynne in his fifth article,¹⁸ and Edmonds in the Official History,¹⁹ without naming the members. However, in 1947 Edmonds felt able to admit in the 1918 Volume V that they were: himself, Major-General Jeudwine (GOC 55th Division) and Brigadier-General MacMullen (BGGs XIX Corps).²⁰ How this choice was made was not recorded, but it does show that there was no one at GHQ whose responsibility this was. The committee proposed a thinly held outpost line which, in the event of a heavy attack, would fall back on the main line of resistance, situated out of range of the German field artillery, where the main battle would be fought. This does sound remarkably like the French Fifth Army proposal used as a basis for the German doctrine. This is not the last we shall hear of this idea. In his final article Wynne, who may have had sight of the generals' report,²¹ states: 'This committee considered that there was insufficient time for the half-trained British troops to learn the details of the German doctrine.'²² While this may be so, there is more to it than that. The troops were not the only ones with no training; formation and unit commanders had no experience either. Elastic defence requires the independent action by unit commanders, a concept that was foreign to the British Army's culture, in which it was normal to wait for orders from above. Thus the whole army was not prepared for such a doctrine. This linear defence was modified by GHQ to the zonal system finally adopted, to conform with the German doctrine.

On the 7 December 1917 Haig took the opportunity at an army commanders conference at Doullens to 'give a dissertation on defence',²³ together with an assessment of the situation. On this occasion Rawlinson and Byng were the only army commanders present, although representatives of the other two commanders were there. They were given an advanced copy of OAD 291/29, *GHQ Memorandum on Defensive Measures* and asked for their comments.²⁴

In Rawlinson's reply dated the 10 December, he pointed out that the proposals in

¹⁸ Wynne GC, 'The Legacy', *Army Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2 (October 1939).

¹⁹ Official History 1918 Vol. I, fn p 42.

²⁰ MacMullen is the least known of the three, during 1917 he was involved in the planning of 3rd Ypres, see Official History, 1917, Vol. II, p. 14.

²¹ Unfortunately no copy has survived.

²² Wynne GC, 'The Legacy', *Army Quarterly*, Vol. XXXVII, No.2 (October 1939), p. 20.

²³ CCC, Rawlinson MSS, RVLN 1/9: Diary, 7 Dec. 1917.

the memo 'materially affects the winter policy of the Second Army',²⁵ as he had assumed that the offensive would be continued in 1918, when the divisions had been brought up to strength. His main concerns were the lack of manpower for the infantry and for constructing defences, which amounts to the same thing, and the vulnerability of the Ypres salient. The artillery in that area was well forward protecting the infantry and any attack in force would mean that 'the loss in men and guns will be considerable, material must outweigh sentimental considerations.'²⁶ In fact, Rawlinson seems to have already anticipated the doctrine outlined in the GHQ Memorandum. In *Organisation of the Army Front during Winter 1917-18*,²⁷ dated 24 November, Second Army GHQ outlined in Item 11 a *General System of Defence*. It described a system very like that eventually proposed in OAD 291/29, with defence zones and defended localities. The wording and ideas are so similar to the translations of German documents that Rawlinson may have had an advanced copy.

Horne's main concern was the Portuguese Corps holding the line south of Armentières. Both its divisions were under strength, and morale was poor. There were proposals to relieve it, but this would require two British divisions which were just not available.

After the Army commanders conference a meeting was held for the Army staff and corps commanders of Fourth Army, where Rawlinson gave an overview of the situation following the collapse of Russia. The BEF's policy would be defensive rather than offensive, and the Flanders campaign would not be continued in the spring, although the winter organisation memorandum mentioned above said that it would. Thus, formally at least, the BEF policy had turned a complete *volte face* within the space of a few weeks.

After all this deliberation GHQ produced the *Memorandum on Defence Measures* dated the 14 December 1917, which must have been presented to army commanders on that day, as First Army held a corps commanders conference to discuss it on the 15th. Besides giving an overview of the new defensive doctrine, the memorandum introduced to the BEF the concept of defence in depth utilising zones, and the application of ideas taken from the German manuals on positional warfare. The Armies had much work to do; as compared with the Germans', the British trench system

²⁴Official History, 1918, Vol I, Appendices, pp. 22-30.

²⁵CCC, Rawlinson MSS, RWLN 1/10, Item 63.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd MSS, Folder 59, Appendix 28.

was very rudimentary.²⁸ To the BEF the front was a place from which to start offensives, so two lines of trenches sufficed - front and support with a few saps out into no-man's-land.

GHQ had decided that the main resistance would be on ground favourable to the BEF and this battle zone was marked on the maps presented with the memorandum. Anything in front of this was considered to be the outpost zone, later called the forward zone.²⁹ Where the front position was strong these two zones often coincided. Behind the battle zone was the rearward zone for use if things did not go well in the battle zone. The battle zone was to be the back-bone of the defensive system. Usually 2-3,000 yards deep it was to consist of successive lines of defences, with switch lines between to stop the enemy exploiting any success. The outpost zone was designed to slow down the attack and break it up. The machine-gun was to be the main defensive weapon 'in combination with wire entanglements'.³⁰ There was no idea of the troops in this zone falling back in the event of a strong attack. Rather they were to 'hold their defences at all costs',³¹ even though the battle was expected to be fought in the battle zone. In other words, these troops were expendable. The rearward zone seems to have been there just to give an appearance of depth to the defences, as GHQ certainly had no intention of doing any work on it until more labour became available.

Not only were the physical defences to be in depth, but the troops were to be positioned throughout the front two zones. This concept needed to be continuously reinforced; for example, OAD 291/31 issued by GHQ on the 13 February states: 'Defence in Depth is not generally understood by the troops. Construction of defences in depth must be coupled with the disposition of troops in depth.'³² The BEF was discovering the problem of making changes quickly in a large organisation, in this case nearly two million officers and men. The number of senior officers was correspondingly large. Over seventy-five army, corps and divisional commanders plus their staffs, together with brigadier-generals almost without number, had to be persuaded to accept the new doctrine. These were powerful men; for example, divisional commanders were left to run their formations as they saw fit, being judged on results. Against this background we might question whether the BEF had set itself an almost impossible task

²⁸ On trench maps there was always much more red (German) than blue (British).

²⁹ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 42. It was considered that the original name might cause the garrison to retire without offering any resistance.

³⁰ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, Appendices, p. 23.

³¹ Ibid., p. 24.

in the time available, it took the Germans seven months to introduce the Ludendorff textbook.

Under section 13 - *General instructions for Defence*, OAD 291/29 lists two German manuals SS 561 - *The Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare* - and SS 621 - *General Principles of the Construction of Field Positions*. In these the Germans were said to have ‘embodied two years experience in defence and the principles laid down by him are thoroughly sound and should be carefully studied’.³³ The dates of these two documents have assumed great importance, as a case can be made for their obsolescence and hence a wrong choice by GHQ.

The *Principles of Command* (SS 561) was dated the 1 March 1917. A copy must have been quickly captured as it was translated and issued by GHQ in May 1917 and as has been pointed out by Wynne and Samuels, predates Arras and Third Ypres. Samuels states that a new edition was published on the 1 September 1917, which would have embodied the experience of these two battles, and presumes that a copy was captured and translated. Third Ypres was at its height during the preparation of this edition - say August/September 1917 - so it is questionable how much of the German experience of that battle it contained. A set of amendments were issued by GHQ on the 20 November 1917, which expand the original but do not change it. This could possibly be the ‘new edition’ as the preamble refers to the 1 March version. However, the British were fully aware of elastic defence by January 1918 as the GHQ Intelligence Summary Ia/44122, dated the 20th, had an annex entitled *German Principles of Elastic Defence* which was the translation of an order signed by Ludendorff and issued on 30th August 1917.³⁴ In it he reinforces the principles of SS561, adding that the forward zone was an integral part of the whole defensive system and ‘must be held until orders to evacuate the whole zone are given by the Higher Command’. It is interesting that the BEF has been criticised for this centralised control, and considering the front-line troops to be expendable.³⁵ The *Principles of Construction* might be considered to be the latest. Issued by the Germans on the 15th August 1917, the British edition is dated the 12 December 1917, two days before OAD 291/29. A pre-publication copy must have been used by GHQ in their deliberations.

³² PRO WO 95/175: First Army, General Staff, Jan. - Mar. 1918.

³³ Edmonds added another year, presumably to reinforce the point, see Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 41 fn.

³⁴ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd MSS, Folder 95.

³⁵ Samuels, *Doctrine and Dogma*, pp. 122 and 177 for instance.

As their names suggest, these manuals were not instruction books on the defensive battle. The terrain and tactical situations on the Western Front were so varied that this would have been impractical. Assuming a knowledge of the subject in the reader, they outline the theory, gained through experience, that should be applied. The writer of this type of manual is often in a dilemma. On one hand the principles have to be clearly stated, but on the other it has to be sufficiently general to be relevant to as many situations as possible. Thus to apply the manual requires a practical knowledge of the subject. This was the BEF's difficulty, while they understood the manuals, they lacked the experience of the defensive battle to use them properly.

Wynne claimed that the committee chose the wrong manual in their deliberations.³⁶ According to him they should have used the 1 March 1917 version of *Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Positional Warfare* (SS561) instead of the 15 August version of *Principles of Construction of Field Positions* (SS621). At first this seems a curious statement as both manuals were issued with OAD 291/29, but Edmonds states that SS621 was used and makes no mention of SS561. Wynne then went on to point out that not only did they choose the wrong manual, but they misinterpreted it as well. According to him 'they mistook the protective infantry in the dugouts between the machine-gun nests to be the key centres of resistance and believed the machine-gun nests to be supporting weapons.'

According to Samuels there is no evidence of analysis by the BEF of either the German defensive or offensive doctrines in order to create their own defensive proposals.³⁷ This was certainly true of GHQ in the early stages, Section 3 of OAD 291/29 gave no help. After explaining that there would be little warning it stated 'we must expect an attack by masses of infantry, offering a very vulnerable target, but preceded by an intense bombardment which may be either of long or short duration according to whether the enemy aims at success by surprise or not.' The impression left by Samuels is that GHQ did not give any thought to the form of the German offensive. This is not entirely correct, the Intelligence branch at GHQ issued at least two reports that gave in some detail the form of the new German offensive doctrine. The first, Ia/44835³⁸ - *Deductions from the study of the German Orders relating to the capture of*

³⁶ Wynne, GC, 'Pattern for Limited (Nuclear) War: The Riddle of the Schlieffen Plan II', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. CIII, No. 609, (Feb. 1958) pp. 40 - 50.

³⁷ Samuels, *Doctrine and Dogma*, p. 116.

³⁸ LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd MSS, Folder 95.

Riga, was quickly followed by Ia/45637³⁹ *German methods in attack and indications of an offensive*, dated 16 February. This accurately predicted the surprise attack preceded by a heavy bombardment, including the copious use of gas shell against artillery positions and trench mortars for wire cutting. All that GHQ could comment was that 'There is no reason to believe that the method of breaking through which was effective on the Riga and Isonzo fronts will succeed in the face of a determined resistance', which showed that they had no appreciation of what was in store for them. General Horne drew the latter document to the attention of his corps commanders at a conference on 25 February,⁴⁰ but it was by now too late, the defensive works were being completed and training was well under way. There is no evidence that any notice was taken of this warning. There is, however, evidence that the French had made an analysis of the new German tactics as General Gough was given a pamphlet prepared by the French staff 'on the German organisation and preparations for the battles of Riga and Caporetto'.⁴¹

It may be thought that GHQ's pre-occupation with massed German infantry, and what a good target they would make, was wishful thinking, as the modern literature on German offensive tactics is concerned mainly with the development of storm-troops. However, a Second Army Intelligence Summary for April contained the text of a captured German document signed by Ludendorff, dated 6 April 1918.⁴² In this he gives the preferred method of taking out machine-guns not destroyed by the artillery bombardment - single guns under the orders of the infantry. The artillery was to be used to suppress the fire from the machine-guns, while the infantry was to advance in small bounds in small groups. He went on to say: 'the idea of forcing success by the employment of masses must absolutely be abolished. The effective use of weapons, and not numbers, gives the decision'. Thus, even in March 1918 the infantry following the storm-troops had not learned to spread out, as will be seen in the next three chapters.

Much of the argument about the BEF's interpretation of the German manuals centres round the concept of 'defended localities'. SS621 states in section 11 that 'an infantry position will be constructed as a trench system of several continuous lines' and goes on; 'Between the various lines and between and behind the trench systems, every sort of defence must be prepared and utilised. For this purpose, supporting points (large,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ PRO WO 95/175: General Staff, First Army, Jan. - March 1918, Minutes of Corps Commanders Conference.

⁴¹ Gough, Sir H, *The Fifth Army* (Portway Bath: Reprint by Chivers, 1968), p. 227.

⁴² PRO WO 157/123: Second Army Intelligence Summaries, April 1918. This order was also published in

often closed, works, utilising villages, copses, etc.) and holding on points (small trenches, shell holes, ruins of houses, copses, hedges and such like) will be useful.' In many areas the British 'combined sectors of the front and support trenches, about 200 yards apart, into centres of resistance and grouping 150 - 300 men into each with one or more machine-guns as support weapons. The second row was made by treating the reserve trench, 2500 yards behind in the same way.'⁴³ Thus the BEF moved to defending a position rather than a line. This was not a new idea, according to Major-General ED Swinton, he gave a lecture on this 'blob' system to the Royal Artillery Institute in 1908.⁴⁴ According to Edmonds this move was not popular, he quotes an old soldier as saying 'It don't suit us. The British Army fights in line and won't do any good in these birdcages.'⁴⁵ The divisions then filled these redoubts with too many men. British commanders had yet to learn to thin the front line, which led to their being too few troops left over to form an effective counter-attack force. This meant that another of the components of the German doctrine was missing.

In the German doctrine one task of the infantry in the forward and battle zones was to force the enemy out by counter-attack. While this was well understood by the British,⁴⁶ it was the counter-attack divisions in the rear that they lacked. The preparatory bombardment and the concentration of men and material had usually shown the Germans where the next offensive was to be; and so there was time for them to move reserves into position. Until March the BEF had little idea where the Germans were going to strike, so divisions had to be spread evenly along the front. Also, the shortage of reserves meant that there would be few, if any, divisions available for counter-attacking.

Two other points that were given some thought were gas and tanks. In an article on the coming offensive the *Daily Mail* reported comments in the neutral press 'threatening the most terrible battle of the war with an entirely new and original gas and tanks which are to surpass ours in deadly effects.'⁴⁷ The respirator issued to the BEF, although crude, was quite effective so long as it was worn, and anti-gas drills were extensively practised. In early February there was concern that this new gas would force the wearer to take the mask off 'and so render the troops liable to the effect of a lethal

the *Daily Mirror* on 23 April 1918,

⁴³ Wynne, *RUSI Journal*, No. 609, p. 41.

⁴⁴ Swinton, E, *Eyewitness* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932), p. 123.

⁴⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 258.

⁴⁶ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, Appendix, p. 115, 18th Division Defence Scheme.

gas',⁴⁸ presumably some sort of lacrimatory gas and phosgene. Three weeks later a Second Army memorandum to corps commanders stated; 'Respirators which give complete protection against all gasses used by the enemy must be carried.'⁴⁹ This was a very bold statement given the known expertise of German chemists. To the BEF the use of the tank by the Germans would not have been an unreasonable assumption. Numerous examples of British manufacture had been captured, so a similar and perhaps improved machine might have been built. The main defence against tanks were 'forward' or 'roving' guns firing over open sights. These guns were to be sited at the rear of the forward zone to engage any tanks that broke through. Other proposed defences were high explosive shells used as land-mines and craters blown to block a tank's route and steer them towards the artillery.⁵⁰

The BEF considered using tanks in defence. In January 1918 the army commanders, except the Fourth in the Salient, were instructed by GHQ to study the use of tanks in defence, either in a holding attack or with infantry in a counter-attack.⁵¹ Nothing seems to have come of this, the problems of command were probably too great. To be of any use the tanks would have to have been in the right place at the right time, to cover the whole front would have required an enormous number.

While the infantry were busy building fortifications, the artillery were not idle. The disposition of the guns was also zoned. A X Corps (GOC Lieut.-General Sir T Morland) instruction gives some insight into the Fourth Army's preparations.⁵² Single guns were placed in the forward zone for anti-tank fire and sniping, while the bulk of the field artillery was 2500 - 5500 yards back, behind these were the heavies up to 8000 yards from the front. Much stress was laid on the provision of secure observation posts proof against 8 inch shells, with buried telephone cables and the construction of reserve positions. Each infantry brigade sector was to be covered by a group of field artillery, with at least one observation post per group. Divisional sectors were to have two observation posts for the heavy artillery, which were to be positioned no nearer the front

⁴⁷ *Daily Mail*, 19 February 1918.

⁴⁸ PRO WO 95/175: General Staff, First Army, Jan. - March 1918, OAD 291/31.

⁴⁹ PRO WO 95/277: General Staff, Second Army, March - Dec. 1918, Memo to corps commanders, 5 March 1918.

⁵⁰ PRO WO 95/175: General Staff, First Army, Jan. - March 1918, Corps commanders conference 25 February 1918

⁵¹ PRO WO 158/835: OA 109 dated 18.1.18 signed Kiggell

⁵² LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd MSS, Folder 60: Artillery Instructions 135(G), signed AR Cameron, 18 Dec. 1917.

than was necessary (up to 1000 yards back), the importance of a good view being emphasised. It would seem that the BGRA of X Corps, Brigadier-General AR Cameron, had seen the benefit of keeping the observers out of the front line. The importance of annihilating fire on the Germans the moment they left their trenches was also stressed, while making the point that large scale British attacks had not been stopped by German gunfire. This shows that the army was capable of learning from their experience.

We should not forget the transport arrangements, or what was called 'administrative matters' in the defensive schemes. By the end of 1917 the BEF had an extensive road and rail system behind the front, that had built up over the years. However, a review of the situation was undertaken which concluded that:

The BEF already possessed practically all the transport facilities that it needed, that new construction ought in fact to be limited to works of real necessity, and that the time had come for a review of what more, if anything, it was necessary to provide to meet existing or possible future requirements.⁵³

According to Henniker, the Second Army, which we might consider typical, estimated using 12000 tons per day of artillery shell and 19 trains per day of small arms ammunition.⁵⁴

The two most important things that the BEF wanted to know were where and when the expected German attack would be launched. It could be mounted against any portion of the Allied line, although it was more likely from Verdun to the Belgian coast, which meant that the troops had to be spread evenly over the whole front. Allied intelligence was kept busy throughout the first three months of 1918, trying to ascertain the most likely spot using a variety of sources. Throughout the war much information was gained by both sides from prisoner interrogations. One of the reasons for trench-raids was the capture of prisoners for such purposes, and in the latter part of the war there was also a steady trickle of German deserters who seem to have been quite garrulous.⁵⁵ The problem was, how much credence could be placed on this information? In the Second Army Intelligence Summary for 1-15 March there was a note that there were 'several instances of prisoners being instructed to give misleading and false answers [to the enemy] prior to going on patrol or on a raid.'⁵⁶ News of the arrival of General von Hutier - the victor of Riga - in front of the Fifth Army was

⁵³ Henniker, AM, *Transport on the Western Front*, (London: HMSO, 1937), p. 346.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 359.

⁵⁵ Many of them were Alsaticans, with little allegiance to Germany..

⁵⁶ PRO WO 157/84: First Army Intelligence Summaries, March 1918.

obtained from prisoners. The new German offensive doctrine was known for a while as Hutier Tactics, after the erroneous belief that he had originated them; and so the arrival of this one general was enough for Gough to warn his subordinate commanders to be ready for a surprise attack. Identification obtained during trench raids enabled an Order of Battle to be built up. To conceal their preparations for St. Michael the Germans held their assault divisions in back areas, and marched them through the garrison troops, manning the front line, straight into the battle. Much information was gained from air reconnaissance; this had hardly existed at the beginning of the Great War, and aerial photography not at all. By 1918 information from the RFC in the form of reports and photographs were an accepted part of the Intelligence Officer's armoury. Although the Germans took great pains to disguise their preparations 'the close examination of aeroplane photographs showed such things as tracks of troops, trench mortar emplacements, little piles of shells near guns - sure signs of the mounting of an attack.'⁵⁷ Behind the German lines, the Secret Service had networks of spies watching the trains in occupied Belgium. One such group, codenamed 'La Dame Blanche', reported in February that the assault divisions and the extra artillery for the initial bombardment had massed in their area. In March they reported the movement of these troops nearer to the front.⁵⁸ Despite the German subterfuges, intelligence at GHQ under Brigadier-General Cox, who replaced Lawrence in early 1918, was able to predict the time and place of the expected offensive. This was done using a combination of all the factors mentioned above and enabled Cox to predict that the first German offensive would be in the south, contrary to British expectations, and so some divisions were moved to strengthen the Fifth Army.

The failure by GHQ to produce an effective defensive doctrine creates a paradox, as this is the army that had learned the doctrine of an all-arms force, was to withstand the German onslaught during the Spring Offensives and then went on to the Advance to Victory. It is perhaps the learning process that gives us a clue to the answer. The BEF had no equivalent of the German Operations Section, thus when such a problem as this presented itself there was no-one to whom it could be passed as a matter of course. The development of new ideas within the BEF seems to have been on a very *ad-hoc* basis, relying heavily on the efforts of individual field commanders, who then tried them out on their formations. In Paddy Griffith's book on the development of British battle

⁵⁷ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 104 fn.

⁵⁸ Occleshaw, M, *Armour Against Fate* (London: Columbus, 1989), p. 246.

tactics,⁵⁹ there is no evidence of any central authority co-ordinating all the considerable striving for improvement. Normally learning is a downward process, well established 'best practice' being taught to newcomers by the old hands, but in the Great War the staff had little to offer, all the experience was gained at the divisional level, fed up the organisation and formalised in the SS series of manuals. In the case of defensive doctrine, there was no relevant experience within the BEF, and anyway GHQ also had little time for ideas gathering and discussion. In chapter 1 it has been shown that this process was similar in the German Army, but they had three years to develop a doctrine. One success that the BEF had was in the construction of the defences during January and February 1918.

Memorandum OAD 291/29 gives instructions on what has to be done rather than how. The task of the Armies and corps was to translate this document into defensive schemes for their area. The Western Front was one of the great civil engineering works of all time and constructed without any mechanised assistance. Besides the lines of trenches there were newly constructed roads and light railways to move men and materiel up to the front, while in the rear huge encampments contained stores, hospitals and barracks. Once built these works had to be maintained, another labour intensive task. To all this was added the building of new defences.

Although we have no 'Bill of Quantities'⁶⁰ for the work undertaken, it is possible to make a rough calculation of the number of men required to dig a trench the 120 mile length of the British front. The Royal Engineers worked on a figure of 1 cubic yard per day per man. To make a trench 8 feet deep by 8 feet at the top and 4 feet at the bottom would take about 22,500 men the 50 working days that were available up to the end of February when all the defences were expected to be ready. This may not sound very many, given the two million British soldiers serving in France, but we also have to take into account the weather, it being a very hard winter, and German artillery which did not allow the construction of the defences to go unimpeded. Also, men would be required to move the spoil and shore up the trench. This figure is comparable with the 65,000 men who took four months to build the 90 miles of the Hindenburg Line, in autumn weather and out of Allied artillery range.⁶¹

The Fourth Army documents that have survived give an idea of how the

⁵⁹ Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*.

⁶⁰ In civil engineering an estimate of the amount of time and material required to do a job.

⁶¹ Wynne, *If Germany Attacks*, pp. 135-6.

construction of the defences was organised. Upon receipt of OAD 291/29 army commanders called a conference of corps commanders and their chiefs-of-staff. Once work had started fortnightly meetings were held first by army commanders and then corps. As one would expect the reports that survive are fairly formal and only give the army commanders instructions and a very brief outline of points raised by corps commanders.

While this reporting mechanism works, it suffers from two disadvantages. Subordinates tend to report what their superiors want to hear, and problems are glossed over. To ensure progress was on schedule GHQ could have appointed a senior officer to co-ordinate the defensive plans; although, according to Edmonds 'Special Officers' were sent by GHQ 'to ensure the co-ordination of the defence systems of the different Armies.'⁶² What made them special or who they were is not recorded. The Fourth Army did have a co-ordinator: Lieut.-General Morland and the staff of X Corps, who were spare and located in the area. Morland recorded his visits in his diary, but makes little comment about what he found. For example, the entry for 17 January reads: 'To Watts XIX Corps to discuss his army line, then to 2 Corps see Wilson GSO2 discuss 2 Corps line. Good work done.'⁶³ Rawlinson's diary shows that he personally inspected the progress of the works and cross-referencing these entries with Morland's gives an indication of how this inspection process worked. On 2 January Rawlinson visited Hunter-Weston at VII Corps and was 'not at all pleased with progress, and told him so',⁶⁴ so a further visit was proposed in a fortnight. However, one week later Morland was sent to review progress which was satisfactory, so the second inspection was cancelled.

While all the changes were being made within the divisions, corps and army staffs had to organise the construction of defences. A number of sources of labour were available: divisional troops, labour battalions, prisoners-of-war and civilians. The latter two could not be used in the front line, while labour battalions were of limited use as they had to be transported to the front daily and provided with living quarters. Their suitability for strenuous manual labour must be questioned, if they were category A1 surely they would be in the infantry already. Thus the bulk of the work had to be done by the divisional infantry and pioneer battalions.

⁶² Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 100. He may have been one of them as he was Deputy Engineer-in-Chief.

⁶³ IWM, Morland MSS, 94/36/4: Diary, 17 Jan. 1918.

⁶⁴ CCC, Rawlinson MSS, RWLN 1/9: Diary, 2 Jan. 1918.

The labour problem was permanently on the agenda of corps commanders conferences. Corps had no labour of their own and were reliant on their army who in turn received some from GHQ. Army commanders often could do little but offer platitudes. For example, at a First Army conference of 15 December 1917, when discussing the labour shortage on the XV Corps front, Horne stated that no increase could be given but the whole question was being considered 'with a view to the best economical distribution'.⁶⁵ When there is a shortage of any resource it is most important that it is used wisely, corps commanders, who made many complaints about the lack of labour, were continuously admonished for 'wastage'. Even as early as Christmas Eve 1917 at an army commanders conference, those present were informed that labour was not being used well. Typically there was said to be: lack of organisation and inaccurate estimates; labour not released at the end of work; insufficient use of task work and failure to make officers of the labour corps actually responsible for the execution of tasks.⁶⁶ The comments on the release of labour are rather amusing, who is going to give up a scarce resource! Naturally the word was passed down the chain of command. On the 8th January at the First Army corps commanders conference those present were reminded of the need to economise on labour, 'Corps Commanders to look at it'.⁶⁷ Of course, much of this may have been just for show as a copy of the minutes went to GHQ.

One can have a certain amount of sympathy with the corps commanders, who were required to organise their divisions so that the men were rested, trained in defence and used as labour, because there were insufficient men to do each properly. Conference minutes were full of instructions to review the balance of work, training and rest. GHQ also felt it had to comment. OAD 291/31, dated 17 February, points out that in some higher formations the training of troops in reserve is being carried out to the detriment of work on the defences, 'Army Commanders to look at it'.⁶⁸

Rawlinson also looked outside the BEF for labour; once the order for the defensive had been given he called on his neighbours, the Belgians, on 15 December, and again on the 22nd, to ask for assistance. Although courteously received, he came away empty handed as the Belgians had just taken over the Nieuport sector from the French and were in the middle of a re-organisation themselves.

⁶⁵ PRO WO 95/174: General Staff, First Army, Nov. - Dec. 1917.

⁶⁶ PRO WO 95/276: General Staff, Second Army, Nov. - Dec. 1917.

⁶⁷ PRO WO 95/175: General Staff, First Army, Jan. - Mar. 1918.

⁶⁸ PRO WO 95/434: General Staff, Fourth Army, Sept. 1917 - Feb. 1918.

There are more surviving documents dealing with the preparation of defence schemes than the actual schemes themselves. The Armies issued a pro-forma to corps in the form of a set of headings,⁶⁹ which corps then passed to the divisions in their area.⁷⁰ Divisions then drew up a defensive scheme for their sectors which was incorporated into the overall corps scheme.⁷¹ Working in this way had two advantages; the headings and subsequent instructions acted as an *aide memoir* to the staff officers who produced the schemes, ensuring that nothing was left out; also, if a division was moved its replacement would be familiar with the format of the scheme for its sector.

In the winter of 1917/18 the BEF faced two problems: a shortage of manpower and the need for a defensive doctrine. After the war the generals were able to explain their poor performance by blaming the politicians for the former, while ignoring the latter. Now that it has been shown that Lloyd George did not starve the BEF of men, the question then becomes: why did the BEF perform so badly in its choice of doctrine and in the March/April battles themselves?

The basis for any answer to this question is the composition of the pre-war British Army, a small Regular Army that saw itself as part of the Imperial system rather than a continental land army. The expansion of the army during the war led to the inevitable shortage of military skills and especially a lack of officers with staff college training. The military staff at GHQ had their hands full fighting the war, with little time for such things as operational research. Thus, they had to rely on the *ad hoc* committee of three senior officers to look into the question of defensive doctrine.

There is no doubt that GHQ were aware of the German doctrine of elastic defence but the feeling was that this was too sophisticated for the BEF, the excuse is usually given that the troops whose only experience was in the offensive could not be trained in this complex concept in time. While this may have been true if all that was expected was a large trench raid to be dealt with by local commanders, the scale of the expected German offensive would require skills in army and corps commanders that did not exist. Thus the choice of a system of rigid defence copied from captured German

⁶⁹ An appendix to 'Organisation of Army front during winter 1917-18' lists the following headings: I General description of front area, II Defensive dispositions, III Action in case of attack, IV Communications, V Special Units, VI Works Programme, VII Administrative Schemes, VIII Training Schedule.

⁷⁰ The rotation of divisions ceased as far as possible during the winter of 1917/18 so that they could be fully conversant with their sector.

⁷¹ Examples of a corps and divisional defence scheme are given in Official History, 1918, Vol. I,

documents was correct as it was the only one the BEF could cope with at that time. The British thinking on defence in 1918 may be compared with the Germans' of 1915/16, but even as late as 1917 there were still German commanders who believed in rigid defence.

The acceptance of the German doctrine by the British without any critical analysis was due to the lack of any department at GHQ similar to the Operations Section at OHL. Captured documents were translated, printed by the Stationery Service and sent out, usually without comment. Even if there had been such a department, with no experience to guide them such analysis would have been difficult.

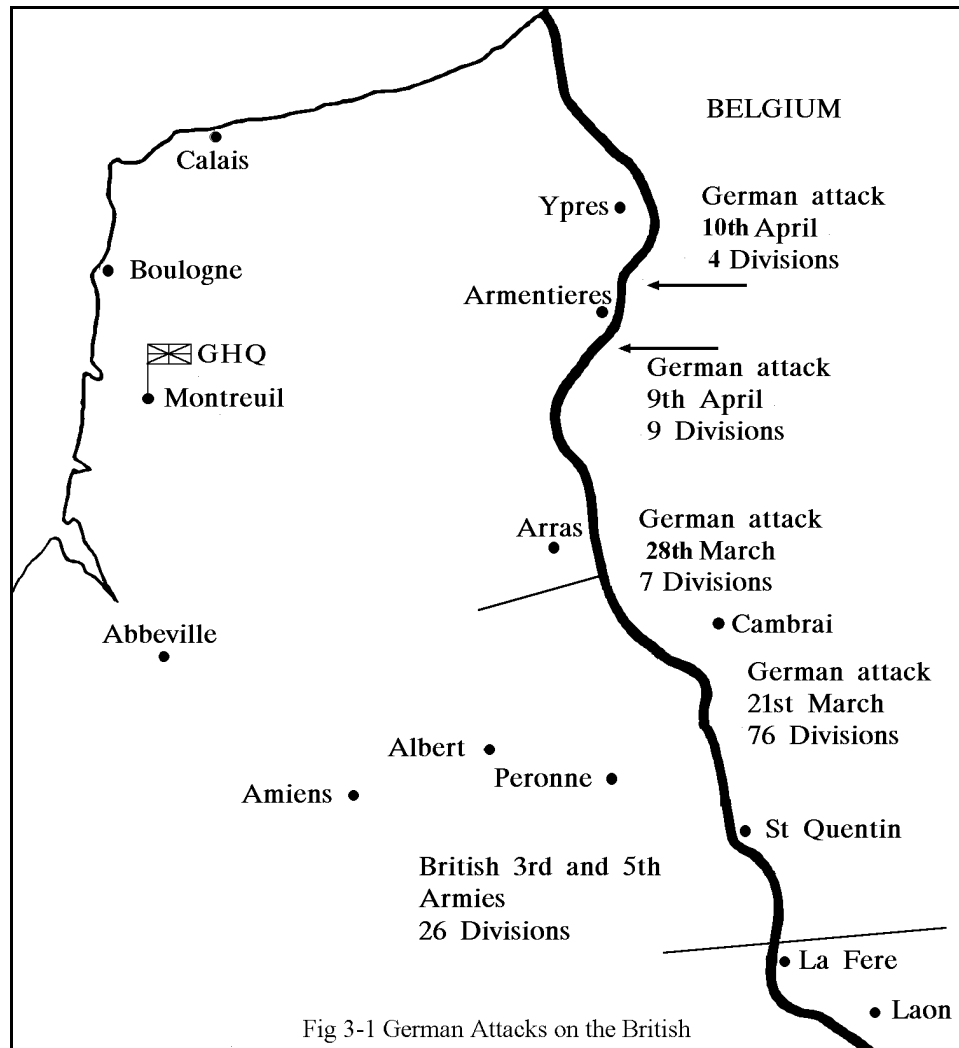
Part of the German doctrine was the use of defended localities, unit, section or platoon, for harassing the enemy if he broke through the front line. The BEF translated this idea into battalion sized 'birdcages' that made good artillery targets, while decreasing battlefield flexibility. This was also allied to the idea of holding the front line at all costs. This almost instinctive soldiers' reaction took a long time to die out in the German Army, the British would now have to go through a similar learning experience. The reason for the British use of battalions rather than platoons in their defended localities was again lack of experience, this time in small unit tactics. For squads or platoons to be able to act independently would have required a large cadre of NCOs or subalterns skilled in the defensive battle, which the BEF did not have.

The one success story in BEF's preparations was the actual building of the defences. They undertook this massive building programme in an organised and professional manner, and completed the front-line defences, which were given priority, on time. This must have been due to the abilities of the officers on army, corps and divisional staffs many of whom were men from the professions, more used to organising than fighting.

After a winter of labour and training the BEF's preparations were to be put to the test. How they fared on the Lys is described in the next two chapters.

Appendix, pp. 53-123, which generally follow this pattern.

THE BREAK-IN BATTLE AND ITS PRELIMINARIES



On the 21 March 1918, the Germans launched their expected offensive with seventy-six divisions on a forty mile front, outnumbering the British by about 3:1.

At 4.40 a.m. the bombardment started, and at 9.35 a.m. the final pounding of the British front line, by trench mortars, enabled the leading storm-troop detachments to

creep forward, ready to rush the dazed defenders.¹ Eye-witness accounts describe the effect as numbing.² In this five hour period the Germans fired approximately one million shells (excluding trench mortar rounds).³ The Germans advance was also aided by a morning ground mist, which enabled them to work round behind the British posts and attack the defenders in the rear. The greatest German success on this day was by von Hutier's Eighteenth Army against Gough's Fifth Army in the area taken over from the French. By the evening of the 22nd, Gough was forced to order a retreat to the Crozat Canal, five miles in the rear of his line. In the north the Germans found the going much more difficult, especially von Below's Seventeenth Army opposite the British Third Army. Unfortunately the Germans were having success where they least needed it. Ludendorff used his reserves in the north to try and effect the breakthrough, but without success, while instructing von Hutier not to pass the line Noyon - Roye. Accepting this setback, Ludendorff then directed his efforts against Amiens, the major rail centre for the supply of the southern part of the British front, using von der Marwitz's Second Army. Von Hutier was allowed to move forward and reached Montdidier, some forty miles from his start line, the deepest penetration of the whole war. At this line he was stopped by a hardening Allied resistance, the exhaustion of his troops, and the difficulty of supply.

Meanwhile, all efforts were concentrated against Amiens; von der Marwitz was given the last reserve of nine divisions, but again the Germans ran into the problems of exhaustion and supply. The route to Amiens lay across the devastated area of the Somme battlefield which hampered the progress of vehicles, while British aircraft attacked the columns of marching reinforcements. The supply problem had started on the first day of the offensive; despite the efforts of specially allocated engineer companies, the movement of material across no-man's-land and the British front line area proved more difficult than had been expected. Ludendorff complained that too many guns were pushed up at the expense of ammunition.⁴ As the Germans progressed into the British back areas, they began to 'liberate' the vast amount of stores that had not

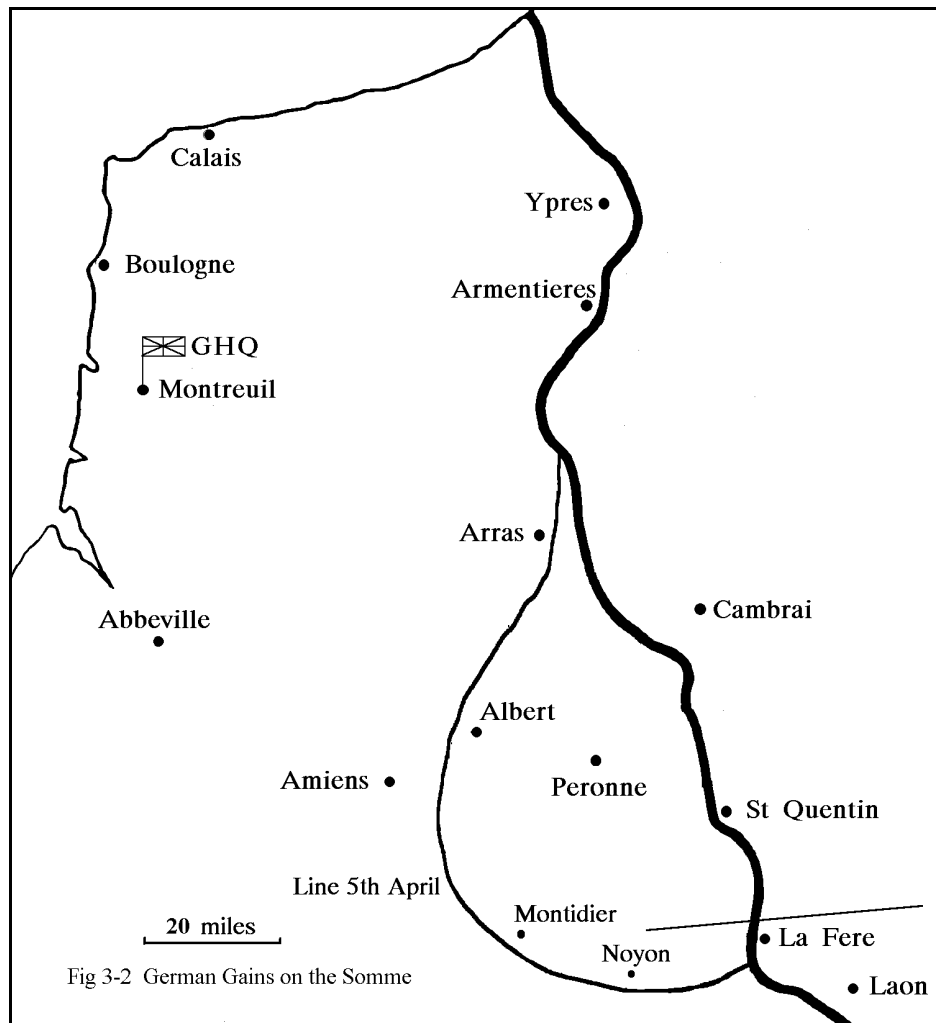
¹ The actual times of the assault varied from place to place.

² Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, p. 161.

³ Official History, Vol. I, pp. 153-8 gives the number of guns and the stockpile of ammunition for the bombardment.

⁴ Ludendorff, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, p. 580.

been destroyed.⁵ While the food would have been a welcome addition to their diet, the German soldiers also discovered liquor which led to many cases of drunkenness, and some units were not able to proceed with the advance until its effects had been slept off. After a pause for supply and rest the offensive against Amiens was renewed on the 30th, but by then the British line had hardened and French reinforcements were arriving behind the front. They tried again on the 4 April with even less success.



Once battle had been joined French assistance to the British, especially the Fifth Army, was tardy in arriving. Although no unified command existed at this time there was a private agreement between Haig and Pétain to come to each other's aid in the event of an attack. At first Pétain considered the German offensive was a diversion, and

⁵ Liddell Hart, *First World War*, p. 396-7.

that he was soon to be attacked in Champagne. On the 24 March, during discussions at the Fifth Army GHQ at Dury, Haig realised that the basic principle of French strategy was to protect Paris and not, as arranged, to maintain touch with the British. However, in the event Ludendorff's restraining of von Hutier, and the appointment of a single Allied co-ordinator in General Foch, allowed French reinforcements to arrive and the Allied remained in touch. Thus the opportunity to sever the connection was lost to the Germans.

One Fifth Army casualty does not appear on any list, its commander, General Sir Hubert Gough. There had been murmurings against him in high places for some time; he was known to be a 'thruster', and the price in casualties paid for the capture of Passchendaele did not enhance his reputation. On 5 March the Secretary of State for War, Lord Derby, had written privately to Haig suggesting that he remove Gough, who would be made Governor of Gibraltar as a sop, to which Haig made no reply, but the crisis brought matters to a head.⁶ A disaster of this magnitude had to have a reason. To pre-empt his critics, Lloyd George decided, with prompting from Sir Henry Wilson the CIGS, that Gough should be the scapegoat. The first that Gough knew of his new part was on 27 March, when Haig's Military Secretary, Major-General Ruggles-Brise, arrived at Fifth Army GHQ and informed Gough that he and his staff required rest. General Rawlinson was to be moved from the Supreme War Council at Versailles, and would take over on the next day. Instead of being sent home, Haig gave Gough the task of organising a Reserve Army which was to be responsible for the construction of all GHQ defence lines. This was probably a ploy to keep him in France, while Haig tried to change the government's mind. Haig championed Gough's cause at a meeting with Lloyd George on 3 April, pointing out the difficulties on the Fifth Army front. Lloyd George had no answer to this, and was only able to comment that the Somme bridges had not been destroyed which was only partially true. At about this time the reason for the dismissal changed to the 'official' reason that his troops had lost confidence in him. However, Lloyd George prevailed and Gough was sent home pending an enquiry, which never happened. He was not honoured like the victorious army commanders after the war, and had to wait until the thirties for any recognition when he received a KCB.⁷ In

⁶ French, D, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition 1916-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 233.

⁷ He may be said to have had the last laugh on all his contemporaries, outliving them all, dying aged 92 in 1963.

an article in the *RUSI Journal*, Edmonds, who was at GHQ at the time of Gough's dismissal, added a little to the version given in the Official History.⁸ Given Edmonds' love of gossip this is probably as much as we shall ever know, as he comments that 'No official papers are to be found with regard to the supersession of Sir Hubert Gough ... action was taken by means of verbal directions and personal letters'.⁹

As the fighting on the Somme was dying down the Germans launched Mars South against the Arras sector. Here the British were to have their first success against the new German tactics, especially in the XIII Corps area.

In his memoirs, Lieut.-General Sir Beavoir de Lisle described the successful defence by the 56th Division (Major-General F A Dudgeon), against a German attack using three divisions, with three in reserve, on 28 March.¹⁰ On 13 March 1918 de Lisle took over the XIII Corps defending the Vimy sector, the southern-most part of the First Army line.¹¹ After a tour of inspection of the defences he decided they were 'faulty in principle and inadequate' and wrote a report in which he pointed out his objections and proposals for improvement which he took personally to General Horne, the army commander. The original defences had all the strength in the front line - a series of half-company posts with the ground between them covered by machine guns firing indirect. De Lisle realised that these would soon be destroyed by 'the overwhelming artillery and trench mortar fire we should expect'.¹² The new defences were to have a first system of three lines, comprising front and support lines for outposts only with the principal line of resistance in the reserve line out of trench mortar range.

The second system, made up of front and support lines, 1200 yards behind was protected by wire and machine-gun positions in front of the trenches. The artillery dispositions were also changed, although protected by twelve feet of concrete, it was to have alternative positions prepared for use when an attack was expected. We can see here an example of the defensive system proposed by the GHQ committee, in particular, his holding the front line lightly, keeping out of trench mortar range and moving

⁸ Edmonds, Sir J, 'The Fifth Army in March 1918', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. LXXXII, No. 525 (Feb. 1937), pp. 17-31.

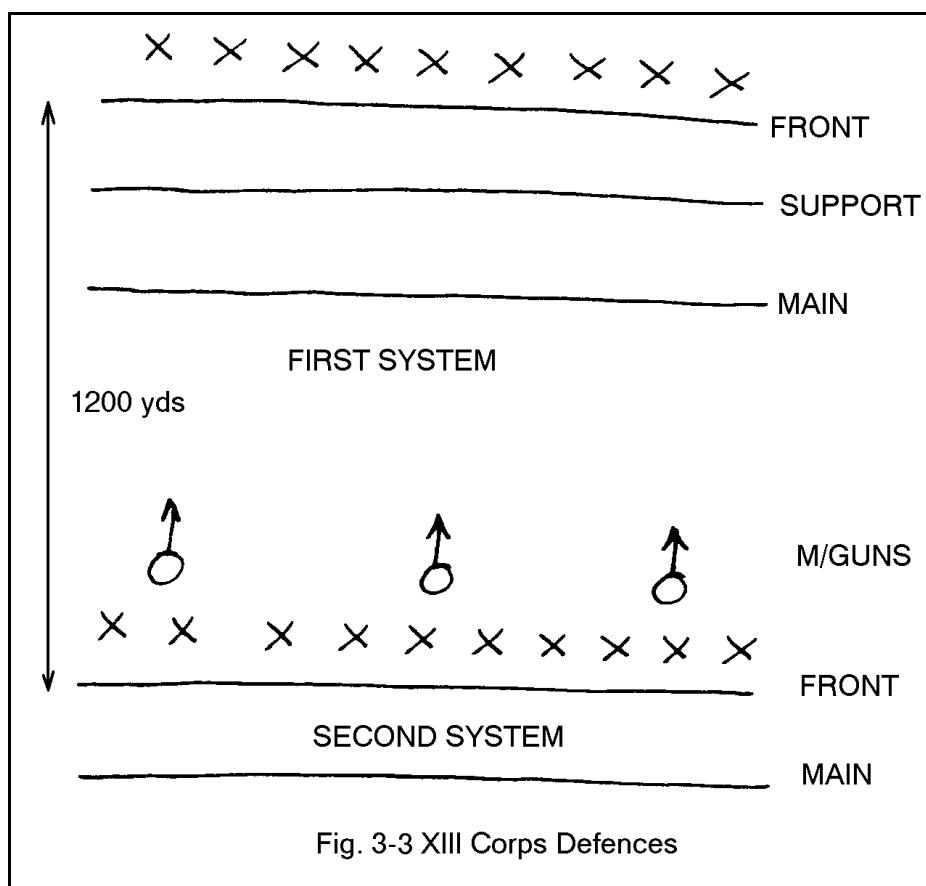
⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁰ De Lisle, Sir B, *Reminiscences of Sport and War* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1939), pp. 162-5. This is amplified by *My Narrative of the Great German War* in LHCMA, de Lisle MSS, 2 vols.

¹¹ De Lisle had been GOC 29th Division, at that time located in the Ypres Salient.

¹² De Lisle, *Narrative*, Vol. II, p. 73.

artillery away from their known positions where they could be subject to gas shelling. After obtaining agreement from Horne - which he did not expect to receive - he briefed his divisional commanders - 56th and 3rd Canadian.¹³ The new scheme was put into effect in ten days, although how much work this change meant is not recorded.



The interrogation of prisoners taken during the Somme battle gave an expected date of attack north of the Scarpe of 28 March, and consequently during the night of 27/28th the 56th Division artillery was moved to its alternative positions and the outpost line evacuated except for sentry patrols. In both memoirs de Lisle claims to have given the order, whereas in the Official History Horne receives the credit. The front system could not be completely evacuated as this would have exposed the flank of the 4th Division (Major-General T G Matheson), XVII Corps, Third Army, which had a different defence scheme. Regardless of who gave the order the XIII Corps defence was a complete success. The German bombardment destroyed the outpost system and the

¹³ XIII Corps lost 31st and 62nd divisions on 22 and 24 March respectively.

empty concrete artillery shelters. The reserve line held up the German advance sufficiently for an orderly retreat to be made to the second system, the order being given by de Lisle at 10 a.m. A second German attack in the afternoon was met with heavy machine-gun and artillery fire and was a complete failure. In his memoirs de Lisle made the caustic comment that 'so successful was this battle that little notice was taken of it'.¹⁴

Having been saved by their movement on the night of 27/28th the artillery were able to play an invaluable role in this action. Edmonds commented that the expenditure of ammunition 'from the morning of the 28th to the morning of the 29th was about 750 rounds per 18 pdr and 650 rounds per field howitzer, one of the largest of the war.'¹⁵ Even so, he gave the laurels to the machine-guns 'skilfully disposed which played the principal part on this day in checking the Germans'.¹⁶

The above account begs the question, why could XIII Corps conduct a successful defence with no reserves to call on when others failed - both before and after? De Lisle had applied the textbook, especially in his thinning of the front line garrison. With their artillery and machine-guns surviving the bombardment and no mist to hamper them, 56th Division had all their arms available for the defence. He must have realised what the German artillery was capable of, and his machine-guns were not hampered by the mist. The fact that the Germans were expected, and hence lost the important advantage of surprise enabled him to make his preparations, especially moving the artillery and thus saving them for use the next day.

As the divisions of the Third and Fifth (Fourth) Armies came out of the line they were sent north and fresh troops from the First and Second Armies went south. This meant that the First and Second Armies had to hold the line with the minimum of forces while the shattered divisions absorbed drafts and replaced lost material. Of the seven divisions between Ypres and La Bassée only the 55th and Portuguese had not been involved on the Somme. At a conference on 26 March, Haking and Du Cane, commanders of XI and XV Corps respectively, asked Horne for guidance on how they should hold their fronts as they now had insufficient troops for the defence schemes.

¹⁴ De Lisle, *Reminiscences*, p. 164.

¹⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 73.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Horne replied that:

he appreciated this fact but it would be unwise for him to lay down the exact line which should be held on each corps front. We are not strong enough now to fight in depth, but the selection of the exact system of defence to be held must rest with Corps Commanders according to local conditions. He considered that as a general rule the battle must be fought in the Forward Zone.¹⁷

Thus the First Army had given up any idea of defence in depth and its commander had no advice to give.

By continuing the Michael offensive for too long the Germans had to scale down their attack in Flanders, and so by a touch of ironic humour on someone's part George became Georgette. Two armies were to attack on either side of Armentières. Between the La Bassée Canal and Armentières seventeen divisions would be employed by the Sixth Army (von Quast), while between Armentières and Ypres the Fourth Army (von Arnim) would attack one day later with five. The Army Group had one division at its disposal and five were held in OHL reserve. The main force of the first attack was to be against the Portuguese defending the plain between Givenchy and Armentières using four divisions.

In contrast to their meticulous efforts in camouflage in the south, the Germans made no attempt to disguise their preparations opposite the First Army. The reason for this was that there were only nine days between the decision to go ahead with Georgette and the opening attack. First Army Intelligence reported on the 6 April:

Since the morning of 21st [March] there was a general decline in the activity of the enemy artillery along the whole of the Army front, it being most marked between the La Bassée canal and Armentières. The number of temporary camouflaged positions in the neighbourhood of Auchy Haisnes and Douvrin has continued to show an increase.¹⁸

The lack of shelling was significant to artillerymen. On showing his new BGRA the corps front the GOC of XI Corps, Lieut.-General Haking, felt that it was too quiet and the Germans might attack when the Portuguese were coming out of the line.¹⁹ Air reconnaissance continued to show the accumulation of stores and road making materials for making a passage across no-man's-land, while on the ground observers reported the sounds of heavy transport. GHQ thought this all pointed to a renewal of the Mars offensive, with Vimy as the German target. German deserters gave news of the attack

¹⁷ PRO WO 95/175: General Staff 1st Army, Nov. 17 - Mar 18.

¹⁸ IWM, Horne MSS, 73/60/1: First Army Intelligence Summary 16-31st March 1918 dated 6th April,.

on the 7th but, given the British experience during the previous winter, this was hardly top grade intelligence. With the benefit of hindsight there were other pointers but again the Germans could have been bluffing. For example, the gas bombardment of Armentières in the days before the attack was a repetition of the one further south and the 4th South Staffs reported artillery ranging shots on their front in the preceding days.²⁰

The staggering of the attack between the 9th and 10th was probably a subterfuge, there being no tactical reason for it. The Germans were aware of the Allies' ability to move reserves quickly, so anything that would delay this would be worthwhile as the Germans wanted to be through the battle zone and into the green fields beyond within 48 hours. The machine-gun fire to cover their preparations on the night of the 9/10th was 'considered a demonstration by the Higher Command'.²¹

The collapse of the Portuguese Division affected the actions of most of the other formations facing the Germans on the 9th, and so the description of the break-in battle will start with them, after an explanation of how they came to be there. On the outbreak of war the main military concern of the Portuguese government was for the security of their largest colonies - Angola and Mozambique. To counter any German threat much of their small army and its equipment was despatched to Africa and remained there until the end of hostilities. Even though their sympathies lay with the Allies they did not immediately join the conflict, but in March 1916 relations with Germany were broken off. Although the Portuguese Army had no experience of operations above brigade level it was immediately proposed to form a division for service on the Western Front and a training cadre was set up in May 1916. An agreement regulating its co-operation with the BEF was signed in Lisbon on 3 January 1917; due to the shortage of equipment in Portugal it was decided that the British would supply rifles and the French their 75mm field guns, and an advanced party arrived at Brest on 2 February 1917. In mid-February 1917 it was decided to add another division and on 20 April the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps (CEP) was formed with its headquarters at Aire-sur-la-Lys when it became part of the First Army. From the start the CEP was under strength; the main

¹⁹ PRO CAB 45/124: S Metcalfe (BGRA XI Corps) to Edmonds.

²⁰ Vale, W, *The History of the South Staffs Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1963), p. 367.

²¹ PRO CAB 45/122: C Birt (OC 8th Borders, 75th Brigade, 25th Division) to Edmonds.

elements did not arrive until July and contingents were still arriving in November. The cold damp climate did not suit them and 651 officers and men died of sickness by the end of the war.²² The manpower shortage led to a re-organisation of the CEP in January 1918, the Portuguese sector of the line was to be held by the three brigades of the 2nd Division with a fourth brigade from the other in reserve. The remaining two brigades were converted into depot and training establishments with surplus troops being transferred to the line brigades. This change together with a reduction in the front held by the CEP was ordered by First Army on 25 February.²³

The political situation in Portugal did not help the situation, in December 1917 the Democrat government was overthrown and the Republicans (PRP), 'a blanket organisation for many dissident elements',²⁴ declared the New Republic. While the new government was sympathetic to the Allied cause, its policy reflected the general feeling in the country that support should not be in the form of troops.²⁵ This development caused serious disaffection amongst the rank-and-file and further lowered their already poor morale. All these factors, including also the poor quality of the officers, Haig called them 'conceited wretches',²⁶ made the CEP a dubious ally, so it was decided to withdraw the corps from the line and place the 2nd Portuguese Division in reserve under the command of XI Corps.²⁷ General Horne had been concerned about the Portuguese for some time, in his submission to GHQ in reply to the advanced copy of OAD291/29 he stated that he did not think the Portuguese Corps would stand against a German attack.²⁸ To support them it was proposed to post British troops in the battle zone so that the Portuguese need only man the forward zone.²⁹ The order for withdrawal was temporarily rescinded on 24 March due to the situation on the Third and Fifth Army fronts,³⁰ but later it was decided to carry it out on the night of the 7/8th, using the 50th Division (Major-General H Jackson). This was postponed for 48 hours after representations to corps by Major-General Jackson, who felt that his troops were not

²² Johnston, GR, 'The Portuguese Army in the Great War', *Army Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No.1 (Oct. 1937), p. 83.

²³ PRO WO 95/175: First Army GHQ, Jan. - Mar. 1918, Order 189, 25 Feb. 1918.

²⁴ Wheeler, DL, *Republican Portugal: A Political History 1910 - 26*, (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 133.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²⁶ Blake, *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p. 328.

²⁷ PRO WO 95/175: First Army GHQ, Order 190, 18 Mar. 1918.

²⁸ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 147.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

³⁰ PRO WO 95/175, First Army GHQ, Order 193, 24 Mar. 1918.

ready.³¹ On 8 April, XI Corps ordered the 55th Division, south of the Portuguese, to take over from the right brigade of the 2nd Portuguese Division on the night of 9/10 April, while 50th Division was to relieve the centre and left brigades on 9/10th and 10/11th respectively.

All this planning came to nought when the bombardment, orchestrated by Lieut.-Colonel Bruchmüller, von Hutier's artillery advisor who had moved north to supervise the bombardment, started at 4.15 a.m. It followed the, by now, familiar pattern starting with gas shelling of the back areas searching out artillery batteries and command headquarters. During this initial phase a shell landed on the Portuguese divisional headquarters at Lestrem and cut communications with the rest of the division which meant that for the rest of the day General da Costa had to rely on liaison officers to keep in touch with his units. At 4.50 a.m. a British liaison officer with the Portuguese alerted XI Corps (Lieut.-General Sir R Haking) of the situation and the corps mobile reserves, 11th Cyclist Battalion and King Edward's Horse, were immediately despatched to man the rear of the battle zone, while the 50th and 51st Divisions were moved up to the River Lawe. We see here, even before the assault had started, a major difference between the Somme and Lys battles. The First and Second Armies had refitting divisions available, a luxury denied to Gough and Byng. These reserves would prove crucial in the days to come.

Again the morning was misty, visibility being as low as 40 yards in places, and did not clear until mid-day. At 8.45 a.m. the German assault began, using four divisions against the Portuguese, quickly breaking through their defences. Most of the Portuguese then began to move to the rear (although the divisions on either side had seen troops falling back from about 7.30) and by 11 a.m. most of the Portuguese had left the field or become casualties. A German medical officer who was with the first wave relates how 'they came in droves out of their dug-outs with their hands up'.³² However, a few posts did hold out and some troops were absorbed into British units. Neuve Chapelle was not given up by the 6th (Portuguese) Brigade until midday and the 5th Brigade held up the German advance south of Richebourg St. Vaast, two miles north of the 55th Division.³³

The correspondence with Edmonds is full of stories of the Portuguese flight,

³¹ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 188 fn. Footnote quotes 51st Division which is an error.

³² Westman, *Surgeon*, p. 157.

³³ PRO CAB 45/122: J Brind (BGGs XI Corps) to Edmonds.

usually second-hand and nearly all derogatory.³⁴ From these the legend has grown of a barefoot division riding three to a mule all the way to Le Havre, drunk on the contents of the divisional wine store. More serious was the charge that soldiers, captured in a raid, gave away the date of the relief,³⁵ and that the Germans brought forward the attack, originally planned for the 12th, in order to anticipate this. Another correspondent commented that 'Portuguese prisoners in the cages behind La Bassée were complete with kit, and did not look as if they put up much of a fight.'³⁶

The retirement of the Portuguese was expected by the First Army, and so the defensive scheme for that sector placed a British division in the rear of the battle zone. However, although units were 'told off' to be ready to move in the event of an attack, the speed of the Portuguese retreat caught the staff by surprise. Given that some sort of German action was expected this was a serious omission on the part of XI Corps and First Army.

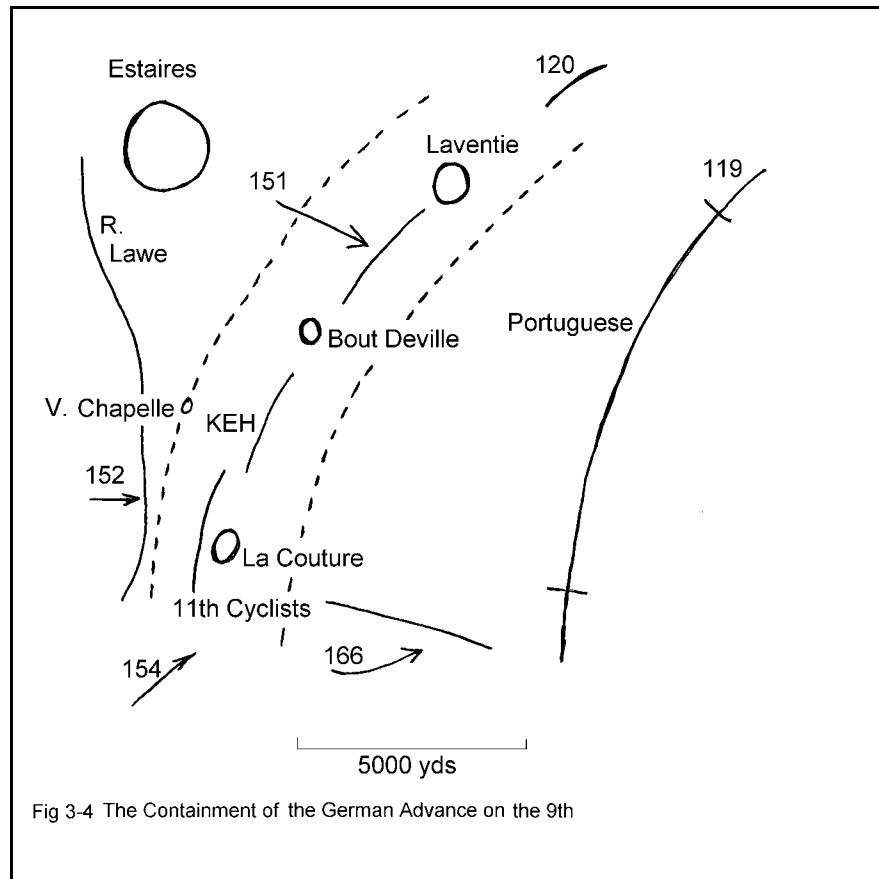
The action to be taken in the event of a Portuguese collapse had already been decided between XI and XV Corps - they would move whatever reserves they had into the battle zone in front of the river Lawe. The 11th Cyclist Battalion and 1st King Edward's Horse were in position between Lacouture and Bout Deville by 7.30 a.m. after being alerted at 5 a.m. At the same time the two reserve divisions, 50th (XV Corps) and 51st (XI Corps) were made ready. The 50th Division (Major-General HC Jackson) brought up the 149th and 150th Brigades to a position south of Estaires where they arrived at 6.30 a.m.; while by 9.30 the 151st Brigade was in the battle zone continuing the line from Bout Deville to Laventie. Meanwhile, 152 Brigade of the 51st Division (Major-General GT Carter-Campbell) which was under the command of XI Corps had been moved to a position behind the King Edward's Horse at 11.30. The intention was that this brigade would take over the front line; but the Germans arrived before they were able to do so. At the same time the 153rd Brigade moved into a reserve position south of Merville and then up to the Lawe at the rear of the battle zone. The 154th Brigade was put under the command of the 55th Division and continued the flank, created by that division with its reserve 166th Brigade, up to Lacouture; this movement being completed by 9.40 a.m. Thus between them XI and XV Corps had the German

³⁴ PRO CAB 45/122-5

³⁵ PRO CAB 45/122: J Boyd (Queens Royal Regiment) to Edmonds

³⁶ PRO CAB 45/122: Brig-Gen. Dick-Cunyngham (GOC 152 Bde, 51st Division) to Edmonds.

advance boxed in almost before it had started.



Leading parties of Germans arrived in front of the King Edward's Horse's position at about 11 a.m. where they were halted by fire. The fighting went on all day, and the line held until the late afternoon when the Germans, who had by then brought up their artillery, began to make headway. A retirement to the line of the Lawe was ordered at 5.30, being completed by 8 p.m. The gap was closed by the quick response of these two small units which shows how useful mobile troops were in this situation. Edmonds commented:

The tenacity and self-sacrifice of the 11th Cyclists and 1/King Edward's Horse, who lost half their numbers, had undoubtedly prevented the German success against the Portuguese from being developed into a complete breakthrough.³⁷

On the 10th, while the Germans were attacking north of Armentières, the line

³⁷ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 177.

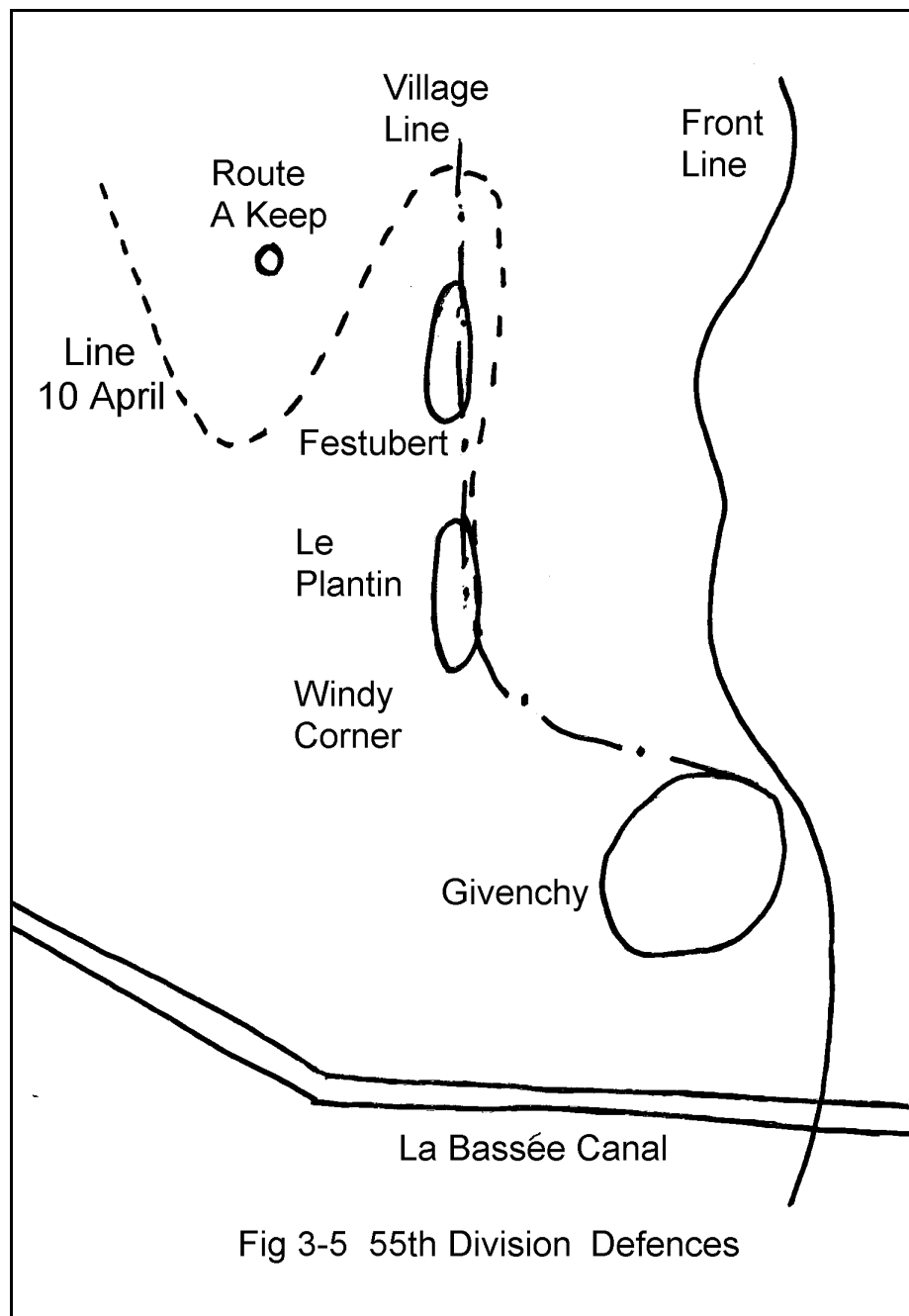
held. However, due to a number of bridges not being properly destroyed, the Germans were able to force a number of crossings and with increase artillery support began to push the British line back. This had been anticipated and a new line, one mile in the rear, had been prepared the previous night to which the troops retired. To the south the German advance was a disaster.

The defence of Givenchy by the 55th Division (Major-General HS Jeudwine) was the most successful repulse of the new German tactics during the Lys battles. In the First Army this was the only division, besides the Portuguese, involved in the front-line fighting that had not been engaged in the March battles, having been in this sector since 15 February.³⁸ Jeudwine was a member of the committee that had drawn up the original defensive proposal already described and the Givenchy defences followed this rather than the zones preferred by GHQ. The divisional sector was divided into two subsectors. The southern Givenchy sector was on slightly higher ground - some 9 feet above the level of the plain according to a contemporary map - which meant that the trenches did not continuously flood. A tunnel had been dug under the village which was forty feet deep and could protect two companies of the front-line reserve from the heaviest shells. Exiting from these deep dug-outs required considerable practice, and later in the battle the 1st Black Watch were to be caught in this tunnel during a German attack and suffered many casualties.³⁹ The main defensive line was in front of the village with no forward line. The northern Festubert sector consisted of a line of posts to break up an attack supported by the main line of resistance known as the Village Line, a series of independent mutually supporting posts rather than continuous trenches, which were protected by water filled ditches and three belts of wire.⁴⁰ The whole was backed up by two more lines in the rear known as Tuning Fork Line and Tuning Fork Switch.

³⁸ The First Army area extended south of the canal where the Canadians held Vimy Ridge.

³⁹ Wauchope, A, *A History of the Black Watch in the Great War, 1914-18* (London: Medici, 1925-6). Vol. III, p. 83.

⁴⁰ PRO CAB 45/124; LB Boyd-Moss (GOC 165 Bde, 55th Div) to Edmonds.



Besides relying on the physical defences Jeudwine laid great store in the training of the division to use them and 'every man knew what was expected of him'.⁴¹ Each post had its own defensive scheme which was regularly practised, including counter-attacks in platoon sized groupings. Anticipating battle casualties all ranks had to be ready to maintain the chain of command and to 'step into the shoes of any senior'.⁴²

⁴¹ PRO CAB 45/124; E Lascelles (GSO2 55th Div) to Edmonds.

⁴² Latter, JC, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers 1914 - 18* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949), p. 329.

Even cooks and clerks were not exempt and had to fire so many rounds over the top every month.⁴³ From all accounts one gets the impression of a highly motivated division confident of its own ability, yet the Germans expected a walk-over, considering them 'tired and only fit for holding a quiet sector of the line', much to the disgust of the Lancashire Territorials.⁴⁴ On the morning of the 9th, the division had the 164th and 165th Brigades in the line with the 166th in reserve. As soon as the German bombardment started, troops were moved up to form a flank facing north, anticipating a retirement by the Portuguese. At first the Germans, aided by the mist, made some progress against the 164th Brigade defending the Givenchy sector, penetrating between the first line of posts, but they were stopped by the rear defences and counter-attacks soon restored the situation. In one of these pockets the brigade captured the brass band that was to play the Germans into Béthune.⁴⁵ On the front of the 165th Brigade in the Festubert sector the outposts fell back on the main line of resistance called the Village Line and except for the loss of one post - Route A Keep - the line was held. During the day the protective flank was continued westward, using a mixture of pioneers, engineers, tunnellers and Portuguese, until it joined with the 51st Division on the Lawe, over three miles east of the original front line.

The German bombardment had failed to neutralise the divisional artillery, at the end of the day only 12 out of the 48 guns had been knocked out.⁴⁶ The remainder, although often firing by prediction due to the mist, caused many casualties in the German front and support trenches. Forward guns often had to defend themselves against infantry attacks. Jeudwine later wrote: 'An anti-tank 18 pdr a short distance in the rear of the front line remained in action all day at point blank range, thanks to all-round wire and the rifles of its detachment.'⁴⁷ He thought that the reason for the 55th Division's success was the defensive scheme:

The answer to the German tactics of infiltration, hitherto so successful, had been found. Small contained posts, organised for all-round fire, with intervals well laced with wire, and stubbornly held, had broken up the attack. Independent platoon counter-attacks had completed the German confusion.⁴⁸

⁴³ PRO CAB 45/122: JES Brind (BGGs XI Corps) to Edmonds.

⁴⁴ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 169 fn.

⁴⁵ PRO CAB 45/122: H Archer (Brigade Major RA 51st Div) to Edmonds

⁴⁶ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 176.

⁴⁷ Jeudwine, H, 'An Episode of the German offensive of 1918 - The Lys Offensive of April 1918', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 73, No. 491 (1928), pp. 688-691.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

While this is certainly true there are other reasons. Many units retreated as soon as their flanks were turned instead of holding out as they had been instructed to do, for example this was specifically mentioned at the army commanders conference of 23 December 1917 which was mainly concerned with defence.⁴⁹ In this case the division's nerve held, which was probably due to their high level of training. Another result of the rigorous training was that continuous counter-attacks were made without waiting for orders from above, even though they were not always successful. One advantage of the rigid defences was good communications; the telephone system was deeply buried and hence the command knew what was going on and could feed the few reserves to the right place in time to have an effect. This also enabled the artillery co-operation to be especially good, for as soon as a German attack developed annihilating fire was immediately brought to bear on the back areas.

The division was justly proud of their stand as the following telegram from the 55th Division Association shows:

Sixteen years ago today the old Fifty-fifth Division under your gallant leadership stood firm at Givenchy. Today the survivors stand firm in their respect and admiration for their leader and comrade and trust you are well.⁵⁰

The sector to the left of the Portuguese was held by the 40th Division (Major-General J Ponsonby), which had suffered 2799 casualties in the March fighting.⁵¹ It was pulled out for a rest on 28 March and travelled north absorbing drafts on the way and doing the many jobs needed to refit a division. According to one of Edmonds' correspondents the sector defences were designed for two divisions, one in the forward zone and battle zone and the other behind the Lys in the rear of the battle zone.⁵² He goes on to say 'Yet the 40th were not withdrawn to the battle zone but remained in the forward zone with instructions to hold it or die'. Later in his letter he commented 'The principles of Defence in Depth while having been propounded in theory were ignored in practice'. The divisional dispositions given in the Official History may be considered typical for the battle - two brigades in the line with one in reserve, each of the line brigades having two battalions in the forward zone and one in the battle zone. On the 9 April 119th and 121st Brigades were in the line with 120th Brigade in reserve near

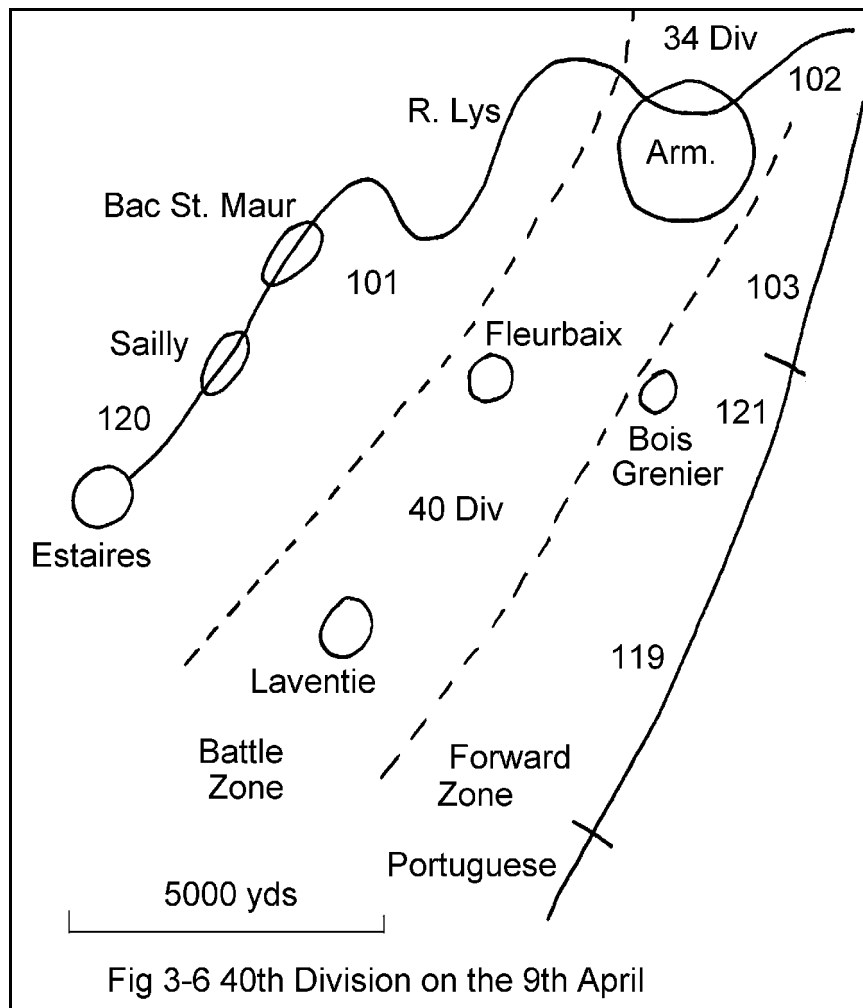
⁴⁹ PRO WO 95/276: General Staff, Second Army, Nov. - Dec. 1917.

⁵⁰ IWM, Jeudwine MSS, 72/82/2.

⁵¹ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 492.

⁵² PRO CAB 45/122: C Black (GSO1 40th Div) to Edmonds.

Estaires.



Again, the retirement of the Portuguese had been anticipated, and a switch line had been prepared near Laventie to cover this eventuality. As soon as divisional HQ realised that their right flank was in the air they ordered the 119th Brigade on the right to man this position. The troops had the greatest difficulty differentiating between the Germans and Portuguese due to the similar colours of their uniforms and shape of their helmets in the misty conditions. So many attackers got past in the confusion and these troops began to envelop the flank of the right battalion - the 18th Welsh - at about 7.30 a.m. before starting on the left battalion - the 13th East Surreys - who were surrounded on three sides at 9.10 a.m. Edmonds claimed that some strong points held out until the

afternoon, although the East Surrey's regimental history makes no mention of this.⁵³ The reserve battalion - the 21st Middlesex - was called forward, but even though half got as far as Fleurbaix, they were forced back with the remains of the 18th Welsh to Sailly-sur-la-Lys. During the afternoon the brigade retreated to Bac St. Maur, a crossing point of the Lys, where three of the four bridges were blown before the British troops were forced over the river, forming a defensive line on the north bank from about 3.30 p.m. By now much reduced in numbers, the brigade, together with the remnants of the 120th Brigade, was again forced back towards Steenwerk and were withdrawn at 6 p.m. The failure to block the river crossing was to have serious repercussions as it allowed the Germans to get behind the 34th Division defending Armentières.

The story of the 121st Brigade, on the left of the 119th, begins with a discrepancy between the Official History and the regimental history of the right battalion - the 20th Middlesex.⁵⁴ On the night of the 8/9th the brigade was to have made a raid using two companies of the 20th Middlesex timed for 4.55 a.m. The British counter-bombardment meant that the party could not enter the German trenches and so returned to their own lines. In Edmonds' version the raiding party set off and were not heard from again.⁵⁵ The Germans soon penetrated the Middlesex trenches and forced them back onto their left-hand neighbours - the 13th Green Howards. The brigade reserves - the 12th Suffolks - were ordered up to Fleurbaix to form a south facing flank which was to have been continued by the 119th Brigade who, as mentioned above, had failed to hold their position. As a result of this, at about 4.30 p.m. the brigade was forced to retire onto units of the 101st Brigade (34th Division) and came under their control.

The 120th Brigade in reserve near Estaires at the rear of the battle zone received the order at 4.45 a.m. to be ready to move to a line east of Laventie where they were to form part of the defences behind the Portuguese. The order to move was received at 6.15 a.m. and they moved off at 7.50 a.m., over three hours after the start of the German bombardment. Unfortunately, the Germans reached the battle zone before them and so the brigade took up a position behind Laventie, which had been prepared some days earlier. The brigade was now in a precarious situation as both flanks were in the air with little chance of either gaining touch with other troops. The pressure of the German

⁵³ Pearce, HW & Sloman, HS, *History of the East Surrey Regiment* (London: Medici, 1933), Vol. II, p. 159.

⁵⁴ Wyrall, E, *The Die-Hards in the Great War* (London: Harrison, 1926-30), Vol. II, p. 224.

⁵⁵ Official History, 1918 Vol. II, p. 173.

assault forced them back towards Bac St. Maur where, as already mentioned, they joined with the remains of the 119th Brigade at about 4 p.m. At the end of the day the division 'was reorganised into two composite battalions which, with the Pioneer Battalion and some Field Companies RE were all that was left of the 40th Division.'⁵⁶

The Armentières sector posed all sorts of problems for the defenders. The town itself was some three miles behind the line and remarkably unscathed considering the destruction of Ypres, in a similar situation, further to the north. During the summer of 1917 the Germans had bombarded the town and most of the civilian population had been evacuated, so at least the defenders would not be troubled by roads clogged with refugees. The town itself was in the middle of the battle zone, yet neither side would have wished to become involved in street fighting, the difficulty of control and supply were too great. The River Lys and various canals meander round the town, creating potential traps for any retreating units. To reduce this risk the seven bridges across the Lys were augmented by a number of temporary floating pontoons which could be quickly swung into position.

This sector of 8000 yards was manned by the 34th Division (Major-General CL Nicholson) which came into the line on 30 March minus its artillery. Having suffered 2741 casualties in the south, the infantry battalions had a high proportion of new drafts.⁵⁷ The divisional history relates that the defences were not in a good condition, the trenches being 'rather decayed' and the posts which were probably meant to replace them badly wired. A XV Corps conference on 1 April left the division in no doubt about the defence policy - *j'y suis, j'y reste*.⁵⁸

One man did try to improve the sector's defences. The GSO1 of the 34th Division, Lieut.-Colonel Sir T Montgomery-Cuninghame, produced a plan to 'abandon the front-line trenches, swing a wide gate open for the enemy to enter and pound him with artillery when he did'.⁵⁹ According to its author, the proposal was thrown into the waste paper basket. Perhaps this sector was not the place for such a plan, it was unlikely to be subjected to a direct assault, rather a pincer movement on either side. Regardless of the reason we do have another example of thinking along the right lines.

⁵⁶ Oatts, L, *Proud Heritage - The Story of the HLI 1882-1981* (Edinburgh: House of Grant, 1961), Vol. III, p. 376.

⁵⁷ Shakespear, J, *The 34th Division 1915 - 19* (London: Witherby, 1921), p. 201. This represents about one third of the infantry strength of a division.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 202, 'Here I am, here I stay'.

The first week of April was very quiet, there being no hostile patrols in no-man's-land, but on the 6th two German deserters gave away the impending attack on the Portuguese and so work commenced on improving the flank defences. Then, on the evening of the 7th Armentières was bombarded with gas causing about 900 casualties, which given the division's previous experience, should have been a warning of what was to come. The initial bombardment on the 9th excluded the front of the 34th Division, but the back areas received a further drenching of gas. This caused problems for the divisional artillery which was in the process of changeover with the previous occupants, the 38th Division. Showing quick initiative the gunners of the 38th took over all guns in division's sector, regardless of ownership, while the 34th divisional artillery took over the duties of the 38th. General Nicholson thus had the disadvantage of fighting the rest of the battle with strange artillery. The bombardment put the division on the alert, so at 6 a.m. orders were given to make ready the pontoons and man the bridge-head defences.

The disposition of the infantry was the usual two brigades in the front line with one in reserve, in this case 102nd Brigade on the left and 103rd Brigade on the right with the 101st in reserve (actually the XV Corps reserve) at Erquinghem behind Armentières. In fact, this was the only corps reserve, there being only two divisions in the corps instead of three. At 10 a.m. the 101st Brigade was transferred from corps reserve to the division to assist in holding the flank created by the retreating Portuguese, and moved south-west from Erquinghem, to take up a defensive position to try to stem the German advance after their capture of the Bac St Maur bridge. The failure to destroy this bridge enabled the Germans to easily work their way into the rear areas and threaten to cut off the division. Shakespear comments that 'there are not many instances of the reserve going into action first.'⁶⁰

During the morning the right flank of the 34th Division together with some units of the 40th formed a line running approximately east - west pivoting on Bois Grenier. At 1.30 p.m. the 74th Brigade - the reserve of the 25th Division on the left of the 34th - was placed under the command of General Nicholson.⁶¹ They moved south from

⁵⁹ Montgomery-Cuninghame, Sir T, *Dusty Measure* (London: Murray, 1939), p. 279.

⁶⁰ Shakespear, *34th Division*, p. 209.

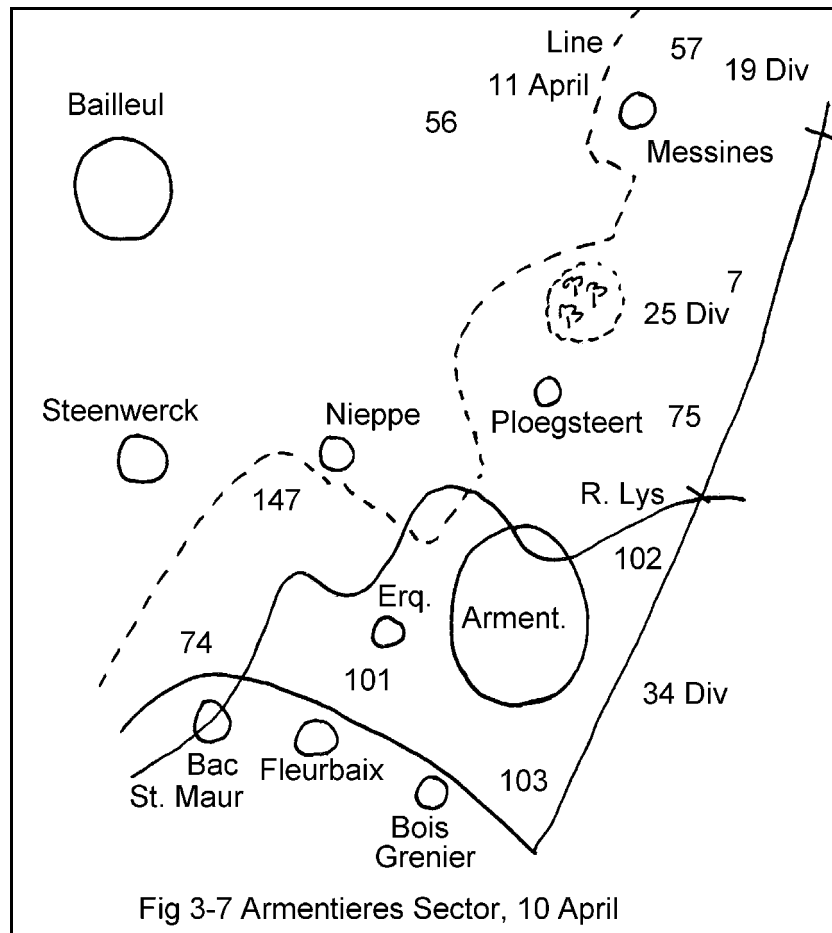
⁶¹ During the Battles of the Lys there was a continuous movement of divisions between corps and brigades between divisions etc., making an Order of Battle for the First and Second Armies during April 1918 a very complex document.

Steenwerck and held the advancing Germans at Croix du Bac, following this with an ambitious counter-attack pushing the Germans back towards the bridge-head over the Lys. The fighting continued during the night of 9/10th and by sheer weight of numbers the 74th Brigade was pushed back to Steenwerck, disputing every position and making the Germans pay heavily for their success.

On the 10th the Germans resumed their attack on the 101st and 103rd Brigades and the line was gradually forced back towards Erquinghem. At a critical point the situation was saved by the 1/4th West Ridings (147th Brigade, 49th Division) who kept the Germans out of Erquinghem for five hours. During the morning anyone who could hold a rifle was put into the line; tunnellers, gas specialists and clerks fought shoulder to shoulder with the infantry. The German attack north of Armentières on the 10th made the position of the 34th Division precarious and the decision was taken to evacuate the town and bring the troops north of the river. The division was beginning to be caught in a pincer, and by mid-morning the enemy troops in Steenwerck and Ploegsteert were only five miles apart. This retirement had been suggested to corps HQ the previous evening, and had been refused, but at 10 a.m. the order was received for the retirement to begin at 3 p.m. The five hour gap being considered necessary due to the difficulty of communications.

The plan was for the 102nd Brigade to retire first; the 101st Brigade would hold the right at Erquinghem, while 103rd Brigade retired north through Armentières and take up a position on the right of 102nd Brigade north of the river near Pont de Nieppe. Then the 101st Brigade would cross the river and the bridges would be blown. The 102nd Brigade received the order at 11.40 a.m. and completed their move by 6.20 p.m. The other two brigades did not receive the order until about 3 p.m. The 101st Brigade held out until about 5 p.m. and then began their move to the north bank, but the Germans began to advance quickly along the north bank and so the masonry bridge was blown and the last crossings were made by emergency footbridge. Unfortunately this all happened so quickly that some men were left on the south side of the river. The 103rd Brigade had to move north into the town and then cross the Lys by one of the three bridges available: the Bailleul - Lille railway bridge, a timber bridge and the bridge at Pont de Nieppe. At 6.45 p.m. two of these were blown but the demolition officer, Major Russell of 208th Field Company RE, decided to delay the destruction of the crossing at Pont de Nieppe and await events. The brigade moved off at 4.30 p.m. under the cover

of mist, (for once the weather was on the side of the British) fighting all the way, although some Germans were met in the town, most of the brigade had crossed the river by 8.30 p.m. and the charge was fired at 10.40 p.m.



Considering that for many of the officers and men this was their first action the successful retreat of the 34th Division is quite remarkable. It was certainly the intention of the Germans to pinch out the defenders of Armentières in their attack, but the division's dogged resistance on the 9th delayed the southern advance and left the gap through which they could escape.

North of Armentières the ground rises until it becomes the Messines - Wytschaete ridge which was captured by the Australians in 1917 as a prelude to Third Ypres. The Australians had remained to garrison this sector and built the defences during the winter of 17/18, they were then moved south to relieve tired British divisions after the March

battles. The author of the 9th Division history,⁶² Brig.-General Croft, rated these defences highly; so well camouflaged were they that his brigade-major fell into a post while looking for it! The forward zone was on the slope of the ridge facing the Germans while the front of the battle zone was on the reverse slope. A request was made by the 57th Brigade (19th Division) to concentrate the front defences on this support line, but although divisional HQ agreed higher authority refused.⁶³

This refusal by IX Corps (Lieut.-General Sir A Hamilton Gordon) to allow the defences to be concentrated on the ridge was ridiculous. It shows just how little some staffs understood defence in depth. This was an ideal position in which to construct a system similar to that of XIII or XI Corps. The front line could not be reinforced during the day as it was under continuous enemy observation. For some reason the 9th Division in the same corps went some way to achieving this having only one brigade in the forward zone. The divisional commander, Major-General HH Tudor, commented to Edmonds 'we had a continuous solid and strongly wired defence line in support and had no intention of holding the outpost line'.⁶⁴ In addition, *Notes for Infantry Officers on Trench Warfare* discussed reverse slopes, pointing out that if the front line were not too far down the forward slope then 'supporting trenches, communications and the works in which a large proportion of the garrison live, enjoy comparative immunity from observation'.⁶⁵ If the back position was taken then there should be sufficient saps to allow continuous observation of the enemy. Thus the reverse slope was 'official'.

The three divisions defending this section of the line, 9th 19th and 25th, had all suffered heavy casualties in the March fighting and had only a few days to acquaint themselves with their sectors of the front. During this time they had been absorbing drafts, or as Croft put it, the drafts were absorbing them. The German attack, again covered by morning mist, followed the usual pattern, except that the bombardment did not have quite the same ferocity. For over two hours artillery positions and any building were drenched with gas and pounded with HE, and in the last fifteen minutes the front line was barraged by trench mortars. The result of the German infantry attack might also be described as 'the usual'. Most of the outposts were quickly over-run and troops

⁶² Croft, WD, *Three Years with the 9th(Scottish) Division* (London: Murray, 1921). He commanded the 27th Brigade during the battle.

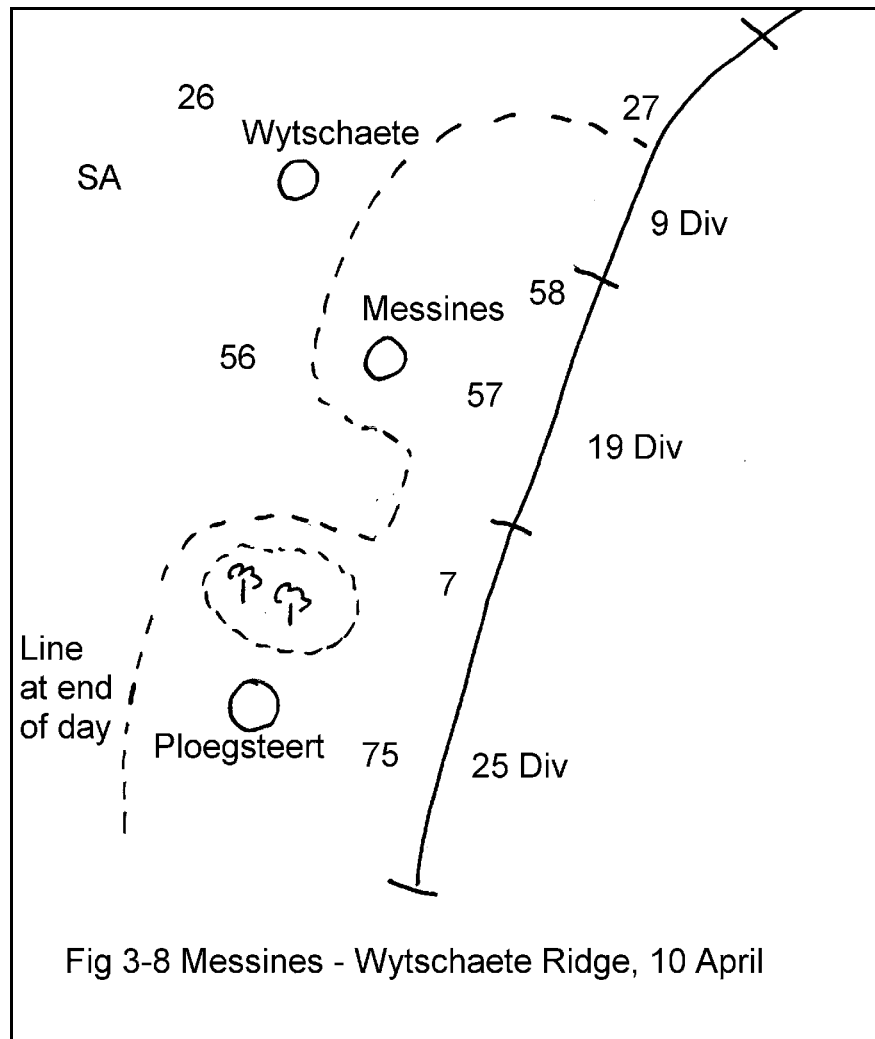
⁶³ PRO CAB 45/122: TA Cubitt (GOC 57th Brigade) to Edmonds.

⁶⁴ PRO CAB 45/124: HH Tudor (GOC 9th Division) to Edmonds.

⁶⁵ General Staff, *British Trench Warfare 1917-18*, IWM/Battery Press Reprint (SS101), May 1917

on the main line of resistance and in the battle zone pushed back. When the British had attacked Messines ridge in June 1917 they used an earthquake, ten months later the Germans used a hurricane. Both methods of subduing the defenders had the desired effect.

The 25th Division (Major-General J Charles) had transferred its reserve, 74th Brigade, to the 40th Division on the previous day to assist in the defence of Armentières and so the two brigades in the front line would have to fight with no supports. Anticipating the withdrawal from Armentières, a right flank had been formed of pioneers and engineers. In addition, the divisional artillery had not yet come up, so it was dependant on three brigades of army artillery. The divisional front line, of some 6000 yards, had the added protection of the River Lys which meanders north-south from Frelinghein to Warneton before turning westward towards Comines. To cover their preparations for the crossing there was much firing of machine-guns during the night of 9/10th which together with the mist enabled the Germans to put pontoons over the river and surmount the obstacle. The German attack started at about 5.30 a.m. and they were soon across the forward zone of the 75th Brigade; but they were held east of Ploegsteert by a detachment from the flank guard aided by the remains of the front-line garrison. On the left of the 75th Brigade the Germans had less success against the 7th Brigade, although Ploegsteert wood was captured. A counter-attack by the 10th Cheshires, the reserve battalion of the 75th Brigade, failed to dislodge the Germans from the wood, and another counter-attack later in the day also failed, in both cases due to insufficient troops being available.



The 19th Division on the left of the 25th had the 57th and 58th Brigades in the front line with the 56th Brigade in support in the battle zone. In the initial assault only the 57th Brigade on the right was attacked and the forward troops were forced back through the two lines of posts and the support line. On the crest of the ridge they rallied and, assisted by the guns of A Battery 88th Brigade RFA firing over open sights, kept the Germans at bay.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, a new rear line had been established running from Wulverghem to Wytschaete, and in the late afternoon the defenders of the ridge were able to move back to its relative safety.

The 58th Brigade's turn came in the afternoon, their only action of the morning being to form a defensive flank on the retirement of the 57th Brigade. At 2 p.m.

⁶⁶ Stacke, H, *The Worcester Regiment in the Great War* (Kidderminster: Cheshire, 1929), p. 351. The battery commander, Captain Dougall, was awarded the VC for his bravery.

instructions were given for the forward battalions to move back to conform with the 27th Brigade (9th Division) on their left. There was a muddle over the orders and the 6th Wiltshires on the right did not receive theirs until 4.30 p.m. when they began to carry it out; the 9th Royal Welsh Fusiliers on the left having already moved to positions in the support line. This enabled the Germans, aided by a late afternoon mist, to work their way around flanks and break up the two forward battalions. During the afternoon the 58th Brigade was transferred to the 9th Division, who moved up part of the 26th Brigade to a position behind the 58th, to which the survivors of the latter withdrew.

The 9th Division (Major-General H Tudor) held the important sector covering the Southeast approaches to Ypres and the beginning of the Salient. The division had only the 27th Brigade in the forward zone with the 26th and the South African Brigade in reserve, the latter being only some 1300 strong, mainly draftees.⁶⁷ The division was subjected to the same attack as the 58th Brigade, but with less success for the Germans. Although the front posts were soon over-run the Germans were stopped at the well wired support line and subjected to a 'shrivelling fire'.⁶⁸ The movement of the 26th Brigade, to cover the gap between the 57th to the 27th once it was realised that the 58th was in danger of disintegrating, has already been mentioned. On finding Wytschaete empty a patrol of the 5th Cameron Highlanders occupied the position until reinforced by elements of the 62nd Brigade who came under the command of the division in the late evening. The brigade's arrival was opportune as the Germans were mounting an attack on the patrol which the combined force was able to repulse, the fighting continuing all night.

One feature of these two days was the counter-attacks mounted to restore the line. Probably the most famous was that of the South Africans against Messines, very late in the afternoon. At first the brigade commander, Brigadier-General Tanner, refused as his troops were so inexperienced, but divisional HQ prevailed. The objectives set by Tudor were very optimistic given the weakness of the brigade. Their first was the Messines - Wytschaete ridge, the second the old British third line in front of the villages and the third the support line, an advance of over two miles from their start point, the Steenebeck stream west of the ridge. At 5.45 p.m. they deployed for the attack: the 1st

⁶⁷ The South African Brigade was sometimes called the 28th Brigade.

⁶⁸ Ewing, J, *The Royal Scots 1914-19* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1925), p. 630.

Regiment⁶⁹ on the right and the 2nd on the left with the 4th in support. There is disagreement in the sources over the degree of artillery support. In his history of the brigade John Buchan said that it was weak,⁷⁰ whereas Edmonds states that they attacked under an excellent barrage fired by the 87th Brigade RFA over new and unregistered ground. The advance was met with heavy resistance from the village and farms along the Messines - Wytschaete road, so the excellent barrage was not sufficient to suppress the fire of the German defenders.

The 1st Regiment reached Messines, charging the last few yards with fixed bayonets, and for an hour severe hand-to-hand fighting took place in the village. The casualties during the advance were such that the village could not be held and the remains of the regiment took up a position about 100 yards west of Messines. This position may have been part of the British defensive system as there is a line of pill boxes still to be seen near the New Zealand Memorial just outside the present village. The 2nd Regiment took its second objective soon after 6.30 p.m., capturing a number of fortified farms, although on the left Pick House held out and continuously enfiladed the South African left flank.

Unfortunately this counter-attack took place too late in the day for any further exploitation and no reserves were available to consolidate the position. The position was lost the next day when the Germans resumed their offensive.

Describing a battle from the infantry's standpoint means that other arms often do not receive the recognition due to them. The German bombardment of British artillery positions was not as successful on the Lys as in the south, although some guns, in close support of the infantry, were lost by fire and the speed of the German advance. Thus, there were many guns available to assist the infantry, particularly in breaking up troop concentrations. Losses could also be quickly made up from the army and GHQ gun parks which were near at hand. Examples have already been given of this co-operation, which Edmonds claimed was partly due to the secure communications provided by the deep buried cables available to the First and Second Armies. The main tribute to the British machine-gunners came from the German accounts summarised at the end of each chapter of the Official History. As the British had found in previous battles, the advance

⁶⁹ Equivalent to a British battalion.

⁷⁰ Buchan, J, *The History of the South African Forces in France* (London: Nelson, 1920), p. 198.

of large units could be held by one gun skilfully handled. The British reluctance to give the machine-gun credit was probably due to its being considered as part of the infantry and not a separate arm.

Military reputations were safe on the Lys, as the German breakthrough could be blamed on foreigners - the Portuguese. Although they were not expected to put up much resistance it was the speed of the German advance that surprised the British and caught them without the promised troops in the battle zone. The defensive schemes for the divisions on either side of the Portuguese allowed for such an eventuality and while they were able to put them into practice, the 40th Division was crushed. The skilful handling of the 34th Division's evacuation of Armentières shows what could be achieved, even when the men were mostly new drafts.

On the 10th the Germans made advances of only 1-2000 yards, mainly because their bombardment had failed to neutralise the artillery and command structure. It is noticeable that the defenders had most success when the Germans were unable to control the weather! The new tactics required the advance to be continuous. As soon as the leading storm-troops were stopped, the following infantry, who still advanced in waves, began to bunch and made excellent targets for the artillery. There are many examples of large concentrations of German infantry being caught in the open when the fog lifted.

The BEF failed to learn the main lesson of the 21 March and placed far too many troops in the forward zone. Most divisions used the 'traditional' trench warfare disposition of two brigades up with one in the rear, the forward brigades would then place two battalions in the outpost line and one in the support line. Given the ferocity of the German bombardment, which most of them had experienced, these dispositions should have been reversed. The Germans preferred to place the three infantry regiments in line and distribute them in depth, a point had to be continuously reinforced after the publication of Ludendorff's *Principles* in 1916.⁷¹ For example, an annex to the GHQ Intelligence Summary of 20 January 1918 makes the above point, and goes on to say:

Holding a divisional sector with two regiments in line and a counter-attack regiment in rear, increases the difficulties of command in battle to a considerable extent, owing to the sectors held by the regiments in line being usually too broad, and also on account of the fusion of units which

⁷¹ A German regiment was roughly equivalent to a British brigade.

quickly occurs during a hostile attack.⁷²

However, some lessons were learned from the March fighting, or perhaps, existing knowledge was better applied. Retreating troops tended to pass through a prepared rear position if there was no garrison in it. On the Lys even parties of engineers and officers servants could induce troops to stop and fight. The King Edward's Horse were to have been re-organised as cyclists, but experience showed the need for small bodies of mounted troops, so they were reprieved.⁷³ In mitigation, it must be pointed out that the Lys followed so quickly on the previous attacks that it may be unreasonable to expect the various staffs to have spent much time on reflection. They were probably far too busy rebuilding their formations.

Having broken through the British front line the Germans still had to exploit their success. The next chapter will describe the breakout battle.

⁷² LHCMA, Montgomery-Massingberd MSS, Folder 95: Ia/44122, German Principles of Elastic Defence - Translation of a German document dated 30-8-17.

⁷³ PRO WO 95/187, First Army GHQ, Q & A.

THE BREAK-OUT BATTLE

It might be argued that the Germans had every reason to be pleased with the situation on the morning of the 11 April. Between the two canals that marked the boundary of their attack, the BEF had been pushed out of the front line, except for a few yards on the southern edge at Givenchy still held tenaciously by the 55th Division. However, all was not well for the Germans, everywhere the advance was held up, either by troops brought in as a counter-move, or by the remnants of the front-line defenders. To have any chance of success, they had to keep the front moving and in a state of chaos, so that they could at least threaten the Channel Ports before more British reinforcements could arrive. The battle had now entered a fluid phase that was to last for the next five days, and cause the Allies much concern. Although the British line had remained intact the whole situation was ripe for exploitation, especially in the German Sixth Army sector on the flat plane of the Lys. Once the advance became bogged down the advantage might pass to the defenders, reinforcements could be slotted into the line, field artillery brought to bear and counter-attacks mounted. Also, once the defence hardened the Germans would have the difficulty of getting things moving again, which in turn would cause delay. Therefore, the Germans were involved in a race against time.

In fact, British reinforcements were already on the way. On the 9 April the 29th and 49th Divisions 'resting' in the Ypres salient after the March battle were transferred to XV Corps defending the Lys plain. What Haig wanted, and spent the battle trying to obtain, were fresh French divisions.¹ With the second German attack on the 10th it was realised by GHQ that, with no French divisions immediately to hand, the BEF would have to look to its own resources, and so divisions were moved from the Third and Fourth Armies, many without artillery and often still receiving drafts to replace their losses while on the move. The 31st, 33rd, and 61st Divisions were ordered north on the 10th together with two fresh twelve battalion divisions, the 5th newly arrived from Italy and the 1st Australian which was detached from the Australian Corps. Even the 39th

Division which, reduced to cadre, had been earmarked for training the Americans was sent to the battle area. On the 11th the remaining two brigades (8th and 76th) of the 3rd Division were moved north of the La Bassée canal to XI Corps, the 9th Brigade having already gone two days before. Moving divisions about like this was, of course, robbing Peter to pay Paul, for if the Germans continued to attack the BEF its infantry would quickly be used up. But help had already been arranged by the Prime Minister. On 23 March 'staring disaster in the face, Lloyd George was magnificent. With characteristic energy and courage, he postponed the morning meeting of the War Cabinet and took charge in the War Office to locate and rush all available troops to Haig.'² This is the ideal task for the man at the top; overriding any departmental demarcations, Lloyd George was able to co-ordinate the actions of the Adjutant-General's department at the War Office and the Shipping Controller, Sir Joseph Maclay. As a result of this visit the cross-channel arrangements were shaken up so that the shipping capacity was increased from 8,000 to 20,000 men per day and in the first week of April 73,618 men were sent to France.³

Haig's immediate need was to get the best out of the men he had and to that end he issued his 'Backs to the Wall' order, which concluded:

There is no other course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause each one of us must fight on to the end. The safety of our homes and the Freedom of mankind alike depend upon the conduct of each one of us at this critical moment.⁴

Although Haig may have had other reasons for issuing this order it left the BEF in no doubt about the seriousness of the situation, even if there were impolite enquiries concerning which wall their backs were to be put against.

During the next five days the most vulnerable part of the front would be from the Nieppe forest to the Flanders hills, covered by XV and IX Corps, the direct route to the Channel Ports via Hazebrouck. The Nieppe forest,⁵ comprising dense marshy woodland and crossed by only two roads, was an impediment to any exploitation in its vicinity. Pushing westward along its southern edge would have created a dangerous salient for the Germans. The hilly area from Armentières to Ypres was a maze of old trench

¹ This aspect of the battle is described in a later chapter.

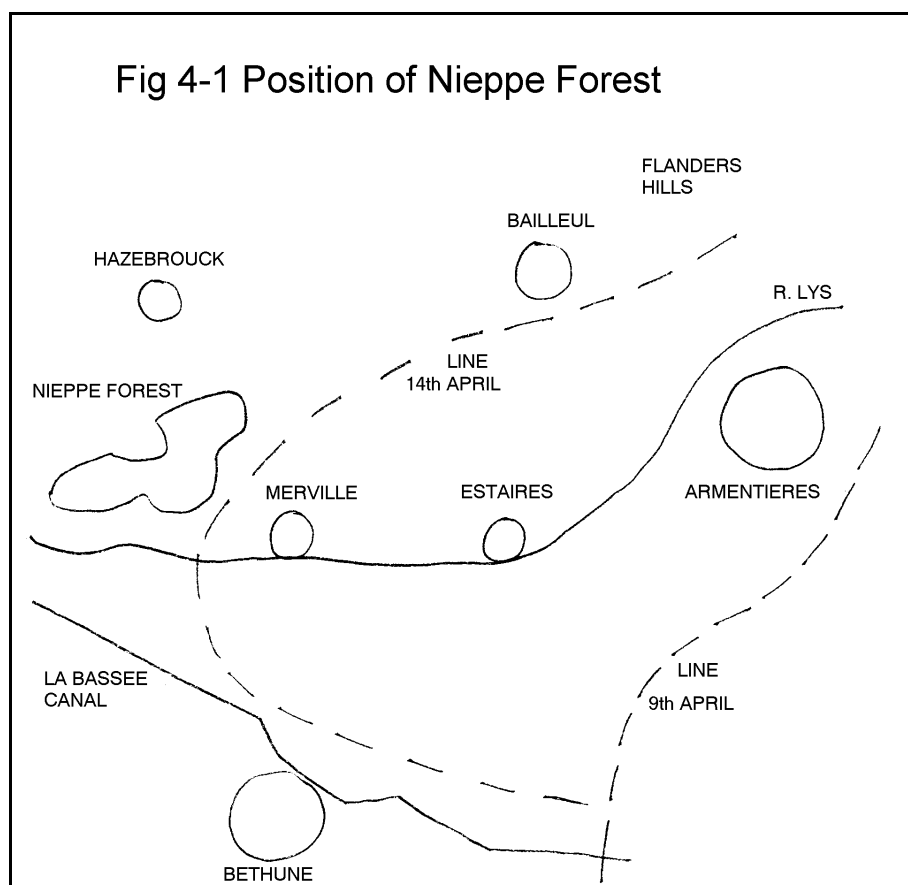
² Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, p. 269.

³ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 11. See also Lloyd George, D, *War Memoirs* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1935), Vol. V, p. 2886.

⁴ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 512.

systems lending itself to defence, which the lack of progress by the Germans on the 10th had proved.

For convenience, and perhaps clarity, the narrative can be broken into three parts: the retreat of XI Corps to the line of the La Bassée canal, the XV and IX Corps fight between the Nieppe forest and the Flanders hills and then the defence of the hills themselves. This also follows a reasonably chronological order.



At dawn on the 11th XI Corps still had only the 51st and 55th Divisions in the line, although the 55th enjoyed considerable machine-gun and artillery support from the 3rd Division, its right-hand neighbour across the canal, and had its 9th Brigade in reserve in front of Béthune. The 55th Division's line, which extended from Givenchy to Locon where it was held by some hastily gathered pioneers and sappers, was shelled and attacked all day by the Germans with little success. The 51st Division's line, now pushed back from its initial position on the Lawe, had an awkward salient in it at Vieille

⁵ The timber was used for pit props in the Bruay mines.

Chapelle where the remains of the King Edward's Horse and the 6th Gordon Highlanders still held the village.

During the day troops of the 61st Division began to arrive, the first being the 1/5th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI), the divisional pioneers, supported by 3 companies of the 39th Division machine-gun battalion.⁶ These units were put straight into the line south of Merville, the DCLI being very much up to strength having recently received a draft of 423 other ranks from the UK, bringing its strength up to 24 officers and 944 other ranks.⁷ Thus the gap between the 50th and 51st Divisions was plugged, while at the same time the 3rd Division was moving into position covering the join between the 55th and 51st Divisions.

Before these reinforcements were in place the Germans continued their assault and not surprisingly the salient at Vieille Chapelle was lost and the 51st Division was pushed back about one mile. It is most likely that the division was saved by its artillery - 255th and 256th Brigades RFA assisted by the 12th Australian Army Brigade⁸ - which gave the retreating troops continuous close support. The guns were often in danger of being overwhelmed and there were many occasions over the next few days when they pulled out just in time, the crews having to defend the batteries with rifle and Lewis-gun fire. By now the division was becoming short of men, especially officers, very few having come up with the drafts when the division was rebuilt after the March battle. Again, the artillery was on hand to assist and a number of gunner officers became temporary infantry commanders. For example, the OC of the 256th Artillery Brigade took over the 153rd Brigade when its commander became ill.⁹ Also, a group of stragglers were formed into four platoons officered by volunteers from the artillery which were to remain in the line for the next two days:

Having led their commands forward, they remained in action with them until the 13th inst. Throughout this period they kept their troops well under control, particularly during the series of withdrawals in the face of vastly superior forces in the rearguard action which took place on the 12th inst. They, indeed, all proved themselves highly capable infantry leaders.¹⁰

There were some changes in command and corps responsibility on the 12th. XV Corps covering the Merville sector was transferred from the First to the Second Army.

⁶ Bewsher, FW, *History of the 51st (Highland) Division* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1921), p. 308.

⁷ Wyrall, E, *The History of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry 1914-18* (London: Methuen, 1932), p. 381.

⁸ An artillery brigade at the disposal of the Army staff which could be sent where it was most needed.

⁹ Bewsher, *51st (Highland) Division*, p. 306.

In the next few days this was to prove a sensible move, as during the battles for Hazebrouck and Bailleul the whole front was under one command. There was also a change of GOC in XV Corps, when Lieut.-General Du Cane became the BEF liaison officer at Foch's headquarters and was replaced by Lieut.-General de Lisle from XIII Corps, fresh from his victory at Arras. Further south, the responsibilities of I Corps were moved north of the canal to include the areas covered by the 3rd and 55th Divisions, while XI Corps extended its line to cover the 50th Division transferred from XV Corps. The actions of the 50th Division and the arriving 5th Division will be covered later. I Corps was further reinforced by the 4th Division from west of Arras. What amounts to an extra corps becoming involved gave the front more support from the corps heavy artillery.

On the I Corps front there were no infantry attacks, but the whole area was shelled all day. The main German success was again against the 51st Division. At 5 a.m. the front of the 152nd Brigade opposite Robecq was driven in and the brigade staff captured, probably due to not having sentries posted.¹¹ A similar fate was almost suffered by 153rd Brigade staff who left by the back door of the cottage acting as their headquarters as the Germans entered by the front.¹² The confused fighting of the rest of the day when the Germans almost reached Robecq shows the value of reserves close up behind the front. The Germans were unable to fan out from this breach due to quick actions by the brigades on either side. To the north the 182nd Brigade¹³ was able to hold a flank between the front line and the River Clarence; while to the south the 154th Brigade was able to hold the line of the La Bassée canal. To conform with these retirements, the left of the 3rd Division (76th Brigade) and the whole 61st Division moved back. The main thrust of the attack was held by the divisional artillery. Surprised by the speed of the German advance the gunners became the front line and in the scramble to escape some guns were lost, their teams being killed by German fire. However, the artillery was able to cover the crossings of the Clarence and the canal stopping the German advance.

By evening the 51st Division had ceased to exist as a fighting force, comprising the 154th Brigade and a collection of engineers and infantry, known as 'Flemings Force' and about 1,000 strong, under the command of the CRE Lieut.-Colonel Fleming.

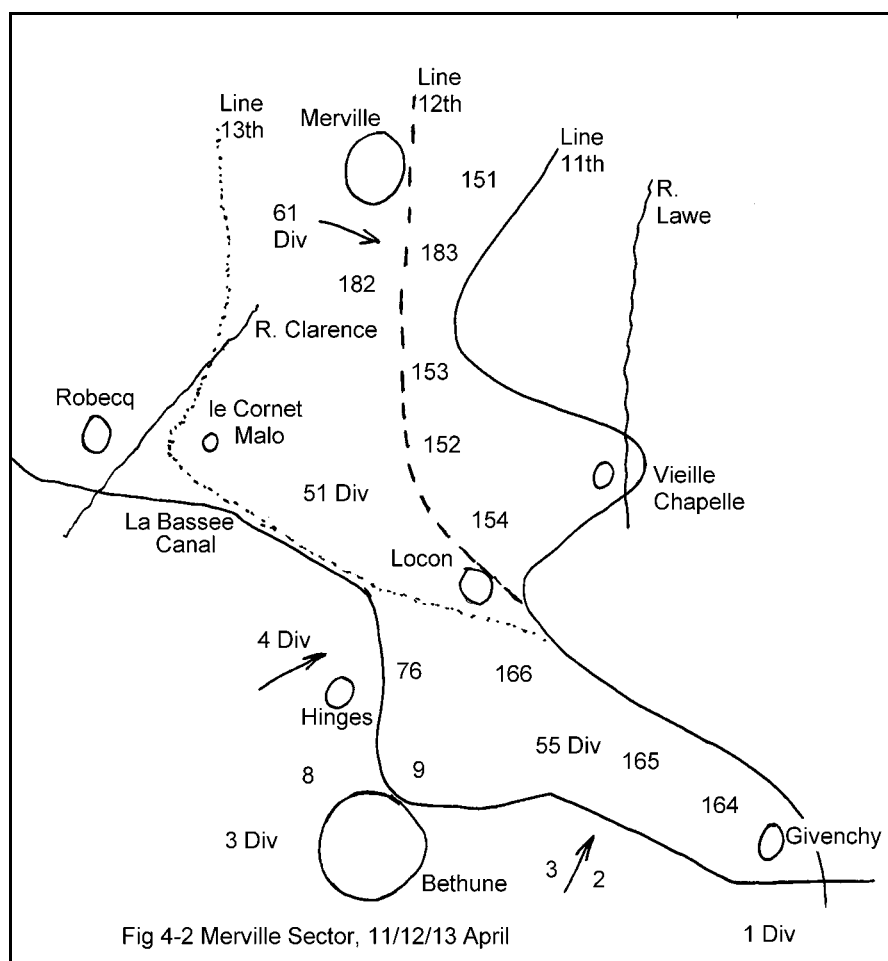
¹⁰ Ibid., p 309.

¹¹ PRO CAB 45/122: Colonel A Symons (GSO1 51st Div) to Edmonds.

¹² Bewsher, *51st (Highland) Division*, p. 311.

¹³ 61st Division reserve.

However, there were now four divisions in XI Corps facing the enemy,¹⁴ the 4th having taken over most of the 51st Division's line.



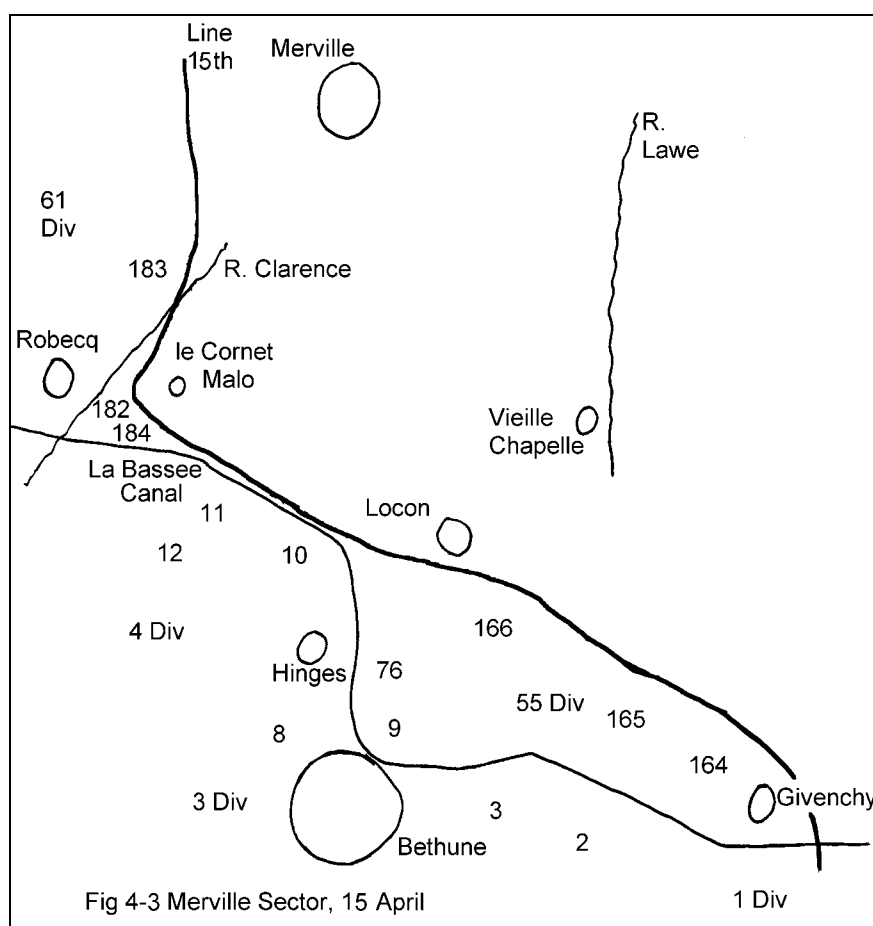
The next three days were relatively quiet. In the 55th Division's sector Route A Keep, a fortified position that had been taken on the 9th, was recaptured by companies found from the 10th and 13th Liverpool Regiment. On the 14th the 4th Division mounted a successful attack to pinch out the German salient at Robecq and recapture the village of Riez du Vinage which shows the value of good preparation coupled with inspired and gallant leadership. The men of the 1st Somersets supported by the 1st Hampshires,¹⁵ were moved across the canal in small groups to avoid giving any indication that something was about to happen. At 6.30 p.m., when everyone was in position, the barrage opened up, drawing heavy machine-gun fire from the Germans, but

¹⁴ 4th, 51st and 61st in this sector, 50th Division north of Merville.

¹⁵ 11th Brigade.

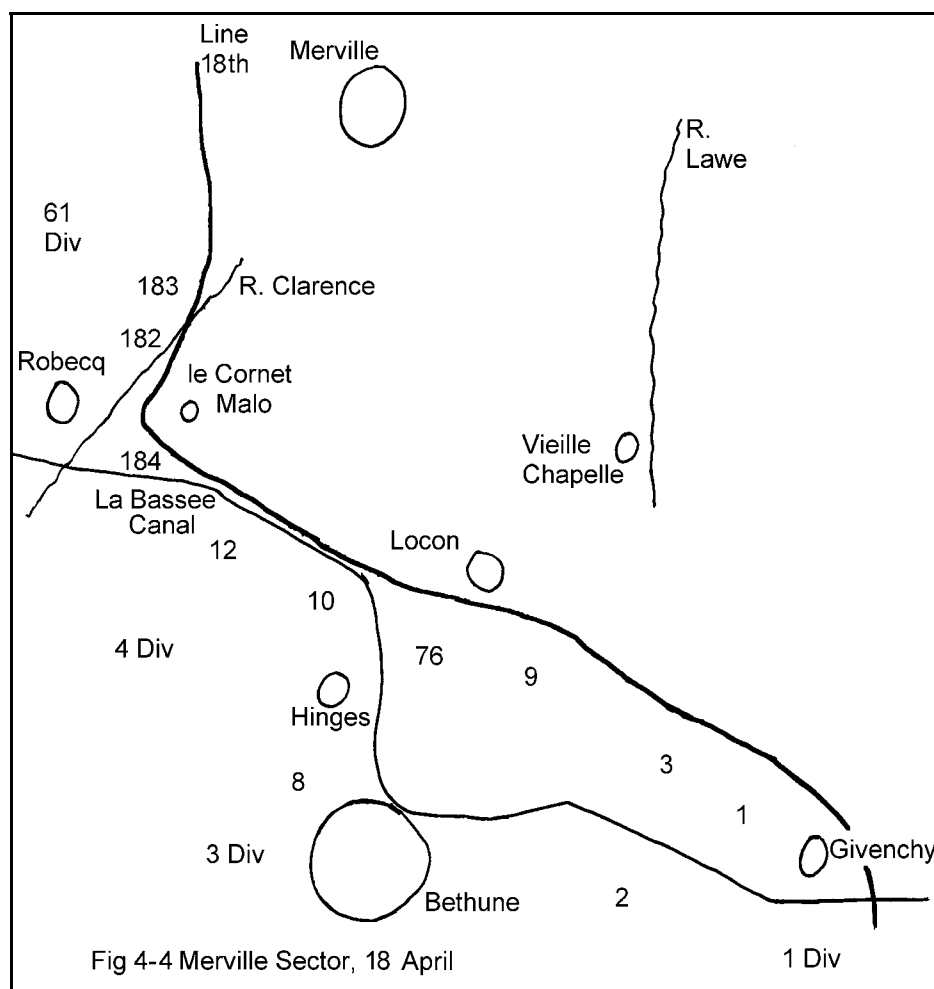
the companies moved off; D(light), B and C in front with A in reserve. Such was the ferocity of the German machine-gun fire that the attack soon faltered, but the OC A Company, Captain LA Osborne, seeing that the attack might fail if it were not pressed, led two of his platoons through B and C companies against the village in a series of rushes. This inspired the other companies to press on and the objective was taken. An immediate counter-attack against the newly captured village was driven off by Lewis-gun and rifle fire, over half the enemy being killed and many more captured.¹⁶

The German troops were by now exhausted, while the British front lay on a good defensive position, the La Bassée canal and the Clarence river. Thus a rest and re-supply would be necessary if further progress was to be made. In fact, it took the Germans four days to prepare for what was to be their last attempt to force a way through to Béthune.



¹⁶ Wyrall, E, *The History of the Somerset Light Infantry* (London: Methuen, 1927), p. 291-3.

On the 16th the 55th Division was relieved by the 1st Division. The Lancashire Territorials had held on against an almost continuous German assault for seven days. The 3rd Division continued the line from Gorre to Hinges, the 4th from Hinges to Robecq, and the 61st from Robecq to the Nieppe forest. The British now had four divisions where there had been two a week ago, defending canal or river lines and supported by considerable artillery.



The Germans tried one more time to force a way to Béthune. Their bombardment began at 1 a.m. on the 18th but was expected, the game being given away by a German sergeant-major captured by the 1st Gloucesters.¹⁷ Their history claims that the ferocity of the shelling was heavier than on 21 March, and was of the usual pattern. The artillery batteries suffered much gas shelling, while any building or cross-roads was

¹⁷ Wyrall, E, *The Gloucestershire Regiment in the Great War 1914-18* (London: Methuen, 1931), p. 265.

subjected to a storm of high explosive. At about 7 a.m. attention focused on the front line after which the German infantry began their advance about one hour later.

In the 1st Division area the village of Givenchy was defended by the 1st Black Watch (1st Brigade) who had taken over from the 1st Loyal North Lancs just before the attack and had had little time to practise exiting from the deep dugouts. The Germans followed very closely behind the creeping barrage and were able to rush the front-line defenders, the troops in the tunnels not being quick enough exiting and so getting caught in a trap, the whole of Givenchy ridge being captured. The Black Watch also had too many men in the front line, three companies up with one in reserve,¹⁸ and the losses of the morning made any counter-attack difficult, even after a '17th platoon' was formed from details and headquarters staff.¹⁹ However, as the Germans did not press their attack it was decided to try and recover the lost ground. Reinforced by a company of the brigade reserve, 1st Cameron Highlanders, a counter-attack was mounted in the afternoon, but the Germans stoutly defended their newly won ground. This attack had to be made with little or no artillery support for fear of hitting their own wounded.²⁰ Thus, we see the value of the 55th Division's preparation and training. The Germans seem to have been content with the capture of the village, as the next day was quiet, this allowed another counter-attack to be prepared and on the 20th the 1st Northhamptons recaptured most of the lost ground.

The left hand battalion of the brigade, the 1st Loyal North Lancs, were attacked at the same time and immediately lost the main line of resistance, but their two companies in reserve counter-attacked and immediately restored the situation.²¹

On the left of the 1st Brigade, the Festubert sector was held by the 3rd Brigade with the 1st South Wales Borderers on the left, 1st Gloucesters on the right, and the 2nd Welsh in reserve. In the first rush Route A keep, an already much disputed outpost, was captured from the Borderers and in the Gloucesters' sector the Germans were able to work their way round Le Plantin village, although the line in the centre remained firm. During the day the Gloucesters were almost surrounded,²² the situation being restored by the brigade reserve later in the day. Again, the Northhamptons cleared up on the 20th,

¹⁸ Wauchope, *Black Watch*, Vol. II, pp. 82-3.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁰ The 55th Division were still in the line.

²¹ Wylly, HC: *The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment* (London: RUSI, 1933), Vol. II, p. 57.

²² Not for nothing do the Gloucesters wear a badge on both front and rear of their caps!

recapturing Route A Keep, supported by the only artillery available - one 18 pdr.²³ By now holding this small fort was a point of honour.

The attack on the 3rd Division was rather half-hearted considering that it was in front of the German objective. In fact, many regimental histories say nothing about any action on the 18th. On that morning the division had the 76th Brigade on the left and the 9th on the right with the 8th in reserve. When the bombardment started the latter moved up from Béthune. The defence was assisted by annihilating fire from the artillery as soon as the German barrage opened, and continued throughout the day in answer to calls from the front line. There was usually good co-operation between the infantry and artillery; for example, the Northumberland Fusiliers' history states: 'At 9.30 a.m. the Germans were seen definitely to be collecting to the east of Loigne Keep and our artillery was immediately turned on this concentration, with the result that no attack developed on the front of the Fifth.'²⁴ The lack of a response from the Germans after a counter-bombardment by the British was typical for this phase of the battle.

The story is much the same with the 4th Division which had the 12th Brigade on the left and the 10th on the right with the 11th in reserve; again as soon as the bombardment started the latter moved up in support of the front brigades. The division was defending a useful feature - the La Bassée canal. To effect their crossing the Germans had prepared 'pontoons and light footbridges supported on bladders'.²⁵ In the 10th Brigade sector the only danger was early in the day when an attack was mounted from the cover of Pacaut wood, which gave cover right up to the canal. After overrunning a couple of posts on their side of the canal they endeavoured to 'launch' an attack over the canal with no success. The experience of the 12th Brigade was similar; although some ground was lost at Riez du Vinage, it was soon retaken in a counter-attack.

Besides the usual shelling and raids by both sides, this was the end of the German thrusts towards Béthune and along the southern edge of the Nieppe forest.

The British positions were not particularly strong, since deep trenches were not possible due to the high water table, and there were still too many men in the front line. Although the German bombardment was as fierce as that on 9 April and they had a superiority in numbers of 2:1, they were still unable to get the offensive moving again.²⁶

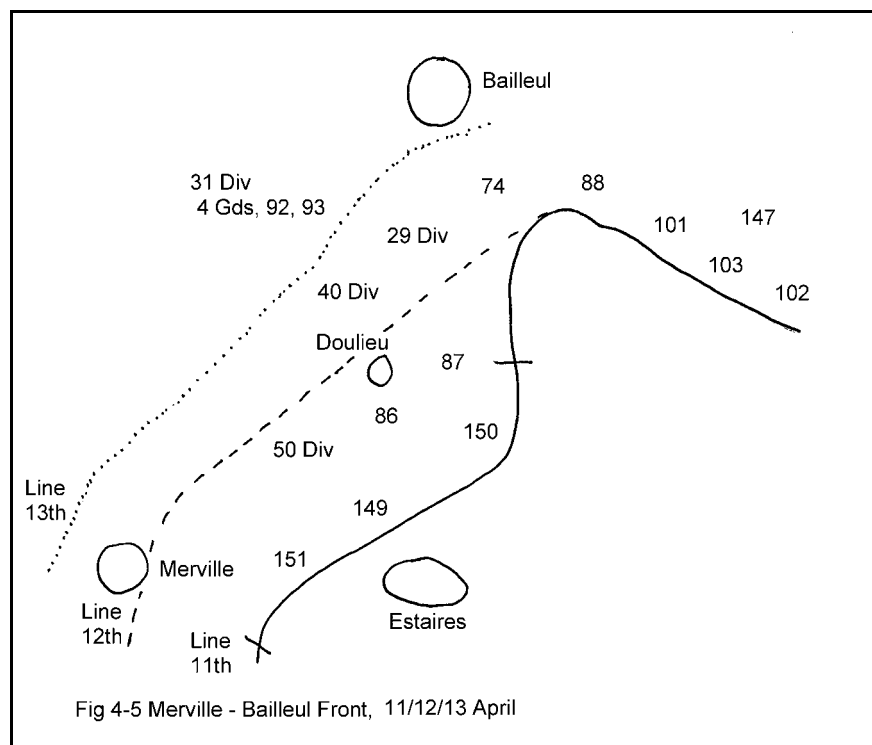
²³ Atkinson, CT, *The History of the South Wales Borderers 1941-18* (London: Medici, 1931), p. 420.

²⁴ Sandilands, HR, *The Fifth in the Great War* (Dover: Grigg, 1938), p. 219.

²⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 361.

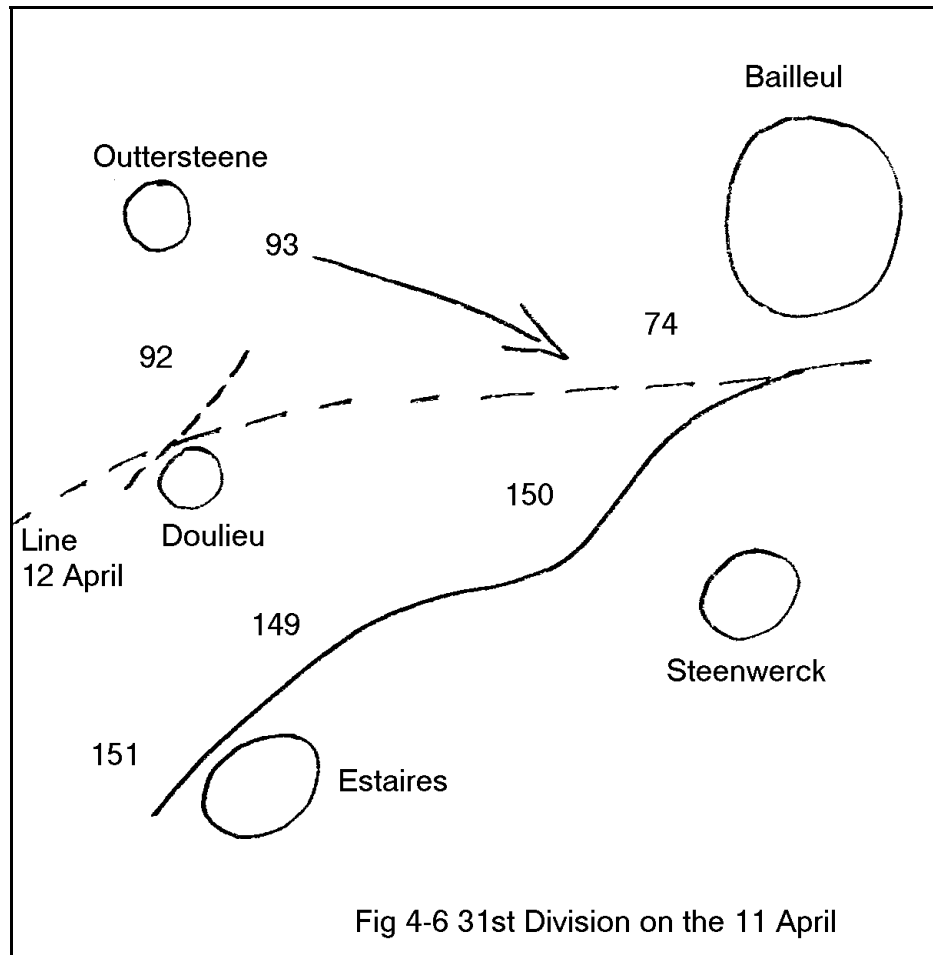
²⁶ The ratio was 3 or 4:1 on 9 April.

There are two reasons for the Germans' lack of success. A lot of the British artillery survived the bombardment, probably because the Germans had had too little time to locate all the batteries. More importantly, the German infantry was becoming tired. Of six divisions used on the 18th, four had been in action since the 9th and the other two had been brought up from the Somme after eleven days rest, so none of them could be considered fresh. This tiredness and perhaps a drop in morale led to a lack of resolve in pressing home the attack. The German divisions on the 21 March would not have been put off by a few defenders.



We now move back to the 11 April when XV Corps was being pushed back by the German assault on Hazebrouck. On the 9th, before the attack north of Armentières, reinforcements for XV Corps had been put in hand. The Second Army provided two brigades from the 29th Division (86th and 87th) and one from the 49th from the Ypres defences. The latter division was to be involved in the fighting the next day. These units had the advantage that they had not been involved in the Somme battles. The third brigade of the 29th Division, the 88th, arrived on the 10th. Instead of using these brigades as one unit, battalions were used to reinforce brigades already in the line. For example, the 87th Brigade lost the 1st Borders to the 149th Brigade while 86th Brigade

lost 2nd Royal Fusiliers to the 151st Brigade.²⁷ This meant that when the brigades came into action they were already under strength and it also added to the general mixing of troops. The 86th and 87th Brigades were sent as a reserve to the 50th Division, which by now had been reduced to a brigade.



The only other reserve in the area was the 31st Division, which had been bussed up from near Arras, where it had been in GHQ reserve. It was placed at the disposal of the First Army. Two of its brigades reached a position six miles east of Hazebrouck by the night of the 10/11th; these two brigades were to be in support of the 40th Division the next day.²⁸ The way in which the four brigades of the 29th and 31st Divisions came into the line, or to be more exact the line came to them, is typical of the battle. During the morning the 92nd Brigade moved forward behind the village of Doulieu, while it

²⁷ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 198.

²⁸ IWM, Typed divisional history. The third brigade, the 4th Guards, were delayed due to late arrival of their busses.

was proposed to use the 93rd as its support. When it was found that what remained of the 40th Division was being scattered the GOC 31st Division, Major-General Bridgford, decided to use his support in a counter-attack to stem the German advance. Covered by only one 18 pdr the advance was successful and a dangerous situation averted.

The 50th Division moved east towards Merville and the line now contained four fresh brigades instead of four weak ones. The town of Merville on the right of the corps sector was under threat from direct German attack and the retirement of the 51st and 50th Divisions on either side of it. A gap was forming in front of the town which fell in the late afternoon. The way to Hazebrouck was now open, but the Germans hesitated in order to loot the vast amount of stores held in the area. Meanwhile during the night of the 11/12th the 4th Guards Brigade, having been delayed by the late arrival of their transport and the crowded condition of the roads, moved into position behind the town.²⁹ What remained of the 150th Brigade also moved into position behind the front north of Merville.

Although units were very intermingled and headquarters were not always sure where the line was, corps and divisional staffs were still in command. By moving up the reserves behind the front, brigade and battalion commanders were able to put them to their best use. The control in the front area had to be left to the commanders on the spot.

Further reinforcements for XV Corps began to arrive during the 12th; the 5th Division detrained west of the Nieppe forest and the 1st Australian Division arrived at Hazebrouck. The Cavalry Corps was ordered up to a position west of the forest to act as a mobile reserve. There was an idea of retaking Merville using the 5th Division augmented by the 4th Guards Brigade but events moved too fast for this to become a reality. It was probably just as well; the troops were better used in defence of a line as counter-attacks were usually expensive. Also, the necessary artillery preparation would have been difficult to organise, as no division in XV Corps seems to have been operating with its own batteries, because divisions usually arrived with only infantry and had to use whatever guns were available. This shows the inherent difficulty of command in the mobile battle.

The 50th Division covering the way to Hazebrouck was told to hold out until it could be relieved by the 5th which was moving along the southern edge of the forest in

²⁹ The stand of the 4th Guards Brigade on the 12th/13th April is included later as an example of a unit action

anticipation of the counter-attack. During the day the division was able to link up with the Guards on its left and the 61st Division on the right. The line south from the forest was now much more secure. However, the main German attack was directed against the 31st and 29th Divisions defending the line between the forest and Bailleul. During the day the left of this line was forced back pivoting on the Guards who held their position. XV Corps was now running out of men and so RE Field Companies were put into the line together with two composite battalions made up of stragglers, machine-gunners, trench mortar batteries and 'details'. A gap, caused by the line being forced back, was now widening in front of Meteren, the 34th Division on its left having no troops to spare to cover it. Again, the situation was saved by a division brought up from the south. The 33rd Division, moved up on the 10th from First Army, had been allocated to IX Corps on the left of XV Corps, and one of its brigades (19th) was moving towards Meteren. The other two brigades (98th and 100th) were already acting as reserves to the 19th and 25th Divisions. The first troops to arrive in the gap were two companies of the machine-gun battalion, under their commanding officer Lieut.-Colonel Seton Hutchison.³⁰ The guns were moved to a position on a ridge which gave a good field of fire using a lorry 'forcibly appropriated'³¹ as he later described:

In Meteren there stood an ASC motor-lorry column. I requested the use of a lorry, but the officer in charge refused it. I hit him on the head with the butt of my revolver, and instructed the driver, a bright young fellow who rendered yeoman assistance to the Division during the ensuing days, to drive off.³²

Later in the day the machine-gunners were augmented by the 19th Brigade infantry, but the division had to use its machine-guns instead of infantry fire-power, and only after their commander had risked a court-martial.

Hutchison risked a second court-martial later in the day when he stopped a battalion marching to the rear and ordered them to take up a line on the ridge, and again he had to strike the commanding officer before he got his way. Hutchison's account of the battle, and many others, often contain stories of retreating troops, while the Official History says only that they 'fell back'. Perhaps the most vociferous was an Australian, Lieut.-Colonel Joynt VC, who served with the 1st Australian Division.³³ According to

³⁰ The other two companies were with the infantry brigades. Hutchison became an exponent of the tactical use of the machine-gun after the war. In his correspondence with Edmonds he did not think that the Official Historian had given sufficient weight to the part played by them in the defence of Meteren.

³¹ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 271.

³² Hutchison, GS, *Warrior* (London: Hutchinson, 1932), p. 239.

³³ Joynt, W, *Saving the Channel Ports* (Melbourne, Aus.: Wren, 1978), see pp. 75 and 78 for examples.

him all British officers were cowards and their men were hardly better; and of course, they all had to be saved by the Australians. Somewhere between the two lies the truth. While the above may be true, they must surely have been the exception, otherwise the Germans would have had an easy victory. However, this does show what could be achieved if unit commanders used their initiative.

This large bite taken out of the British line meant that Bailleul was now threatened, but the 25th and 34th Divisions, although by now much reduced in strength, were still holding the northern part of the line which was not attacked much during the day. The BEF could not spare any more divisions without endangering the line elsewhere. Although French help was on the way, the line would have to be held until they could arrive. Perhaps the only advantage the BEF had was that in many places they now held the high ground.

During the 13th the Australians in XV Corps began to consolidate their line behind the front held by the 31st and 29th Divisions. German attacks were broken up before they could start by combined small arms and artillery fire, but later in the day sheer weight of numbers forced the defenders back onto the Australian line. However, this defence had enabled the Australians to choose their positions and reconnoitre the ground. The line was a series of posts and short trenches using what natural cover there was as a disguise. This was the last line of defence; 'once we marched out from here there would be no coming back and that in fact we were going to dig our graves.'³⁴

The two divisions of IX Corps, 34th and 25th, holding a salient from Bailleul to Neuve Eglise, were by now much reduced in numbers but still subjected to attacks by six German divisions. Meanwhile, a second line was being organised by Major-General Nicholson (34th Division) which ran from the Australians' left along the ridge behind Bailleul to Kemmel. Again, groups of stragglers, reinforcements and engineers were formed into composite units - brigades or battalions depending on the numbers - which were used to support the front-line troops. In this sector a brigade sized unit was formed under Brig.-General Wyatt which helped to man the rear line as the 25th Division reserve.³⁵ Wyatt's Force was typical of these temporary amalgamations of engineers, reinforcements, remnants of battalions and anyone else who could hold a rifle, that the British formed during the battle. Usually placed in the reserve line, they were the formed body of troops required to stop the front-line defenders passing over the rear lines.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 70. Verbal instructions to his company.

³⁵ He was GOC 116th Brigade, 39th Div.

On the morning of the 14th the whole front of XV Corps, from the Nieppe forest to Strazeele, was held by the 1st Australian Division, except for their extreme right where elements of the 4th Guards Brigade were still in the line. Behind these defences various defensive lines in front of Hazebrouck were being prepared by the 3rd Australian Brigade and anyone who could hold a shovel. As a mobile reserve the 2nd Cavalry Division had come up to the west of Hazebrouck. The Australian artillery had not yet arrived and so they were covered by that of the 24th, 34th and 57th Divisions.³⁶ The slightly higher ground behind the Australians gave this artillery good observation and Joynt records that on being informed by one of his posts that 'the Huns were massing in front' he then 'rang up for the artillery and described where the Huns were. Our artillery soon opened up and word came back immediately to the effect that the fire was doing splendid work, shells bursting right over the Huns who had scattered.'³⁷ This was repeated all along the line which was to remain firm for the rest of the battle. The thwarting of an attack on the Australian 3rd Battalion was described by their official historian quoting a Corporal Turvey: 'We saw miles of infantry slowly but surely goose-stepping towards us, officers on grey horses riding up and down the column.'³⁸ A message was sent back to the artillery and the Germans were scattered. On subsequent days the same thing happened, as on the 17th:

Although the German officers could be seen leaping out of the trenches and trying to induce their men to follow, the barrage of the defending artillery and the fire of small arms was so intense that the German infantry standing along the trenches would not leave shelter.³⁹

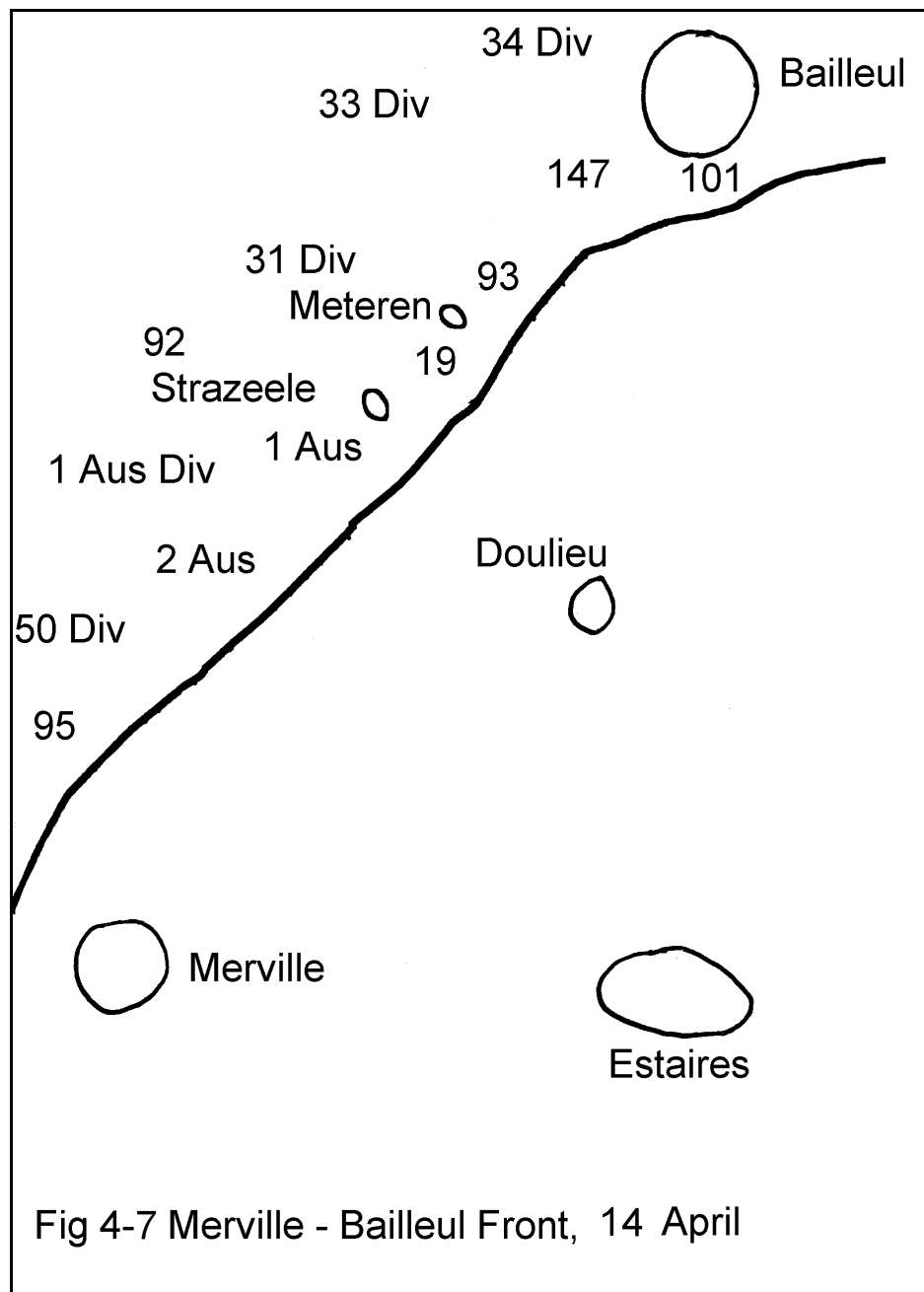
This shows that even German infantry needed an artillery barrage to cover an advance.

³⁶ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 307 fn.

³⁷ Joynt, *Channel Ports*, p. 85.

³⁸ Bean, C, *The Australian Imperial Force in France* (Sydney, Aus.: University of Queensland Press, 1937), Vol. V, p. 466.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 484-5.



Meanwhile, the IX Corps front, which now included the town of Bailleul, was attacked all day by the Germans, but without any success. The corps front was defended by troops of the 33rd, 34th, 25th and 19th Divisions, but so intermingled had formations become that the 34th Division was actually comprised of parts of the 147th, 101st, 74th, 88th, 103rd, 7th, 75th, and 102nd Brigades.⁴⁰ During the night the 34th Division was moved back to the second line while its place was taken by two brigades of the 59th Division (176th and 177th) which had been transferred from Ypres.

Although muddled the position on the IX Corps front was on the 15th held in depth, even if some divisions were not fighting with their own brigades. The 33rd Division was still holding the right of the corps line at Meteren, and in front of Bailleul the 59th Division had now taken over the 34th Division front assisted by the 71st Brigade (6th Division) in the 49th Division sector. On the corps left the 19th Division had 178th Brigade (59th Division), 108th Brigade (36th Division) and its own 58th Brigade in the line, 'well down the forward slope of the Ravetsberg ridge, under observation from the enemy and movement was impossible'.⁴¹ In support were the tired remains of the 19th, 34th and 49th Divisions.

French help had also started to arrive in the back areas, their 133rd Division having begun to concentrate at Castre north-east of Hazebrouck on the 13th, while the 28th Division started to arrive west of Poperinghe on the 14th. The next day the French II Cavalry Corps arrived at Cassell north of Hazebrouck.

The Germans did not begin their attack on IX Corps until noon on the 15th when the bombardment began, a high point known as Crucifix Hill receiving particular attention. Although gallantly defended by the 1/4th Lincolns they had to vacate it when the 9th Norfolks on their left gave way allowing the Germans to enfilade the Lincolns. The line then began to crumble; with their flank exposed the next battalion on the left, the 2/5th Lincolns, had to retire to the second line.⁴²

During the night the 176th Brigade, with no support on its left flank, retired through Bailleul and the town was lost. Thus the 34th Division was again in the front line, but the presence of this manned second line had saved the day. On one side of the 59th Division, the 33rd Division was not attacked but as a precaution manned a switch line to the west of Bailleul when the 176th Brigade withdrew. The brigades on the left of Bailleul also withdrew to the second line, once a proposed counter-attack to recapture the hill was abandoned. The successful attack on the 1st Lincolns shows how vulnerable the British line was, especially when the position being held had no natural defence. Edmonds recorded this dilemma:

The advisability of withdrawing north of Bailleul had been discussed, for the line was of no tactical value; yet the Army commander was unwilling to abandon it for reasons of morale. If the enemy, disheartened by severe losses and failures, found that the British were withdrawing not only from the Ypres salient but also from Bailleul, he might regain his

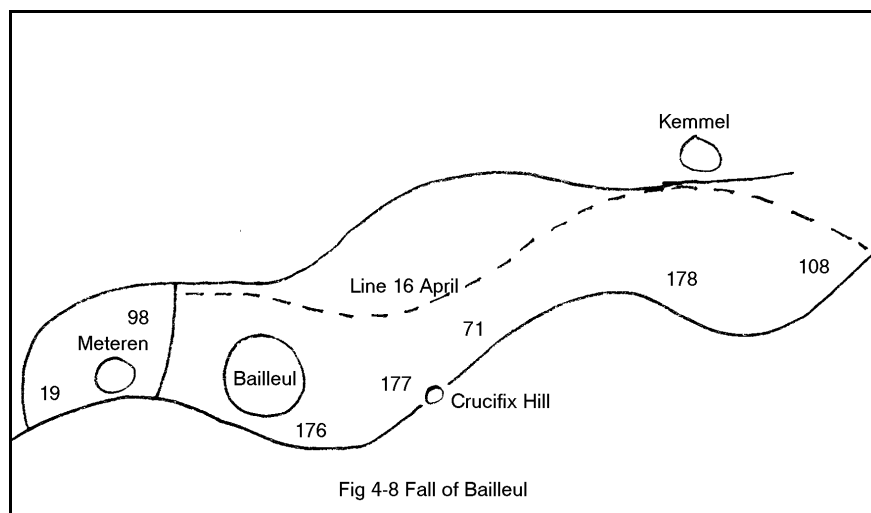
⁴⁰ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 308.

⁴¹ Simpson, CR, *History of the Lincolnshire Regiment 1914-18* (London: Medici, 1931), p. 321.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 321-2.

confidence.⁴³

The BEF had not fully realised the lesson the Germans had learned in a hard school: give up a line of no tactical value for a better one and reduce casualties.



The pressure on the IX Corps line continued the next day (16 April), but the enemy only had success on each flank. The line in front of Meteren was held by the 4th King's with the 5th Scottish Rifles on the right and Tank Corps troops on the left, with the 2nd New Zealand Entrenching Battalion in reserve. When the 5th Tank Battalion⁴⁴ fell back the left flank of the Kings was exposed and their C Company 'practically disappeared'.⁴⁵ The battalion was obliged to fall back and the village was lost. During the fight two companies of New Zealanders were surrounded and 100 were captured, 'a number which by far exceeded the greatest aggregate total captured by the Germans in any one action from the Division'.⁴⁶ The village of Meteren held a key position on the ridge and so a counter-attack by the 1st Middlesex to recapture it took place at 1 p.m. Although they reached the village, they had to withdraw 'as our guns were short shooting'.⁴⁷ According to Edmonds the Germans used tanks in this attack but none of the regimental histories make any mention of the appearance of enemy armour.⁴⁸ In contrast to the failure of the 33rd Division to hold Meteren the 34th Division on the left

⁴³ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 322.

⁴⁴ Tank crews were used as Lewis-gun detachments during the battle, plugging gaps in the line.

⁴⁵ Wyrall, E, *The History of the Kings (Liverpool) Regiment 1914-19* (London: Arnold, 1935), Vol. II, p. 646.

⁴⁶ Stewart, H, *The New Zealand Division 1916-19* (Auckland, NZ: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1921), p. 378.

⁴⁷ Wyrall, *Die-Hards*, Vol. II, p. 230.

⁴⁸ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 332.

behind Bailleul was able to break up the German attack on its line by artillery fire before it got started.

At the same time as they were having success at Meteren the Germans were capturing the village of Wytschaete held by the 62nd Brigade. Covered by a ground mist two German divisions attacked the two front-line battalions, the 1/7th West Yorks and the 1st Lincolns. The battalions held out for as long as possible, both the regimental historians quoted from brigade reports: 'No officer, platoon post or individual surrendered and the fighting was prolonged until 6.30 a.m.'⁴⁹ and 'On our extended front they encountered the full force of the enemy attack on the morning of the 16th and fought most gallantly until overwhelmed by superior numbers'.⁵⁰ After capturing the village 'the enemy seemed contented with his gains and, though he maintained a heavy fire, made no further effort to advance'⁵¹. In a footnote to this remark Edmonds quotes the German sources as saying that the Germans were concerned about not advancing without artillery cover, a charge usually levelled at the British.

General Plumer decided to mount a counter-attack to recapture both Meteren and Wytschaete with the assistance of the newly arrived French troops. Both attacks turned out to be operational disasters and did not augur well for future Anglo-French co-operation. The French 28th Division was to assist the 9th Division at Wytschaete and the 133rd were to recapture Meteren.

The attack on Wytschaete was to take place in the evening of the 16th with the British on the left and the French on the right. During the afternoon there was much contact between XXII Corps, 9th Division and the French, but the latter prevaricated about when they would be ready. As the GOC XXII Corps explained to Edmonds 'I shall never forget going to the French 28th Division headquarters at about 5 p.m. on the 16th and realising that they had either not issued the orders for the attack, or the orders had not reached the troops - I could not make out which it was - and that all my plans and études and combined orders had gone to pot!'⁵² In the event the French did not attack, 'although their higher command was under the impression that they had'.⁵³ Even so, the British set off at 7.30 p.m. and the South Africans and the 7th Seaforth Highlanders reached the village and held out until the next day, they had to retire as

⁴⁹ Simpson, *Lincolnshire Regiment*, p. 323.

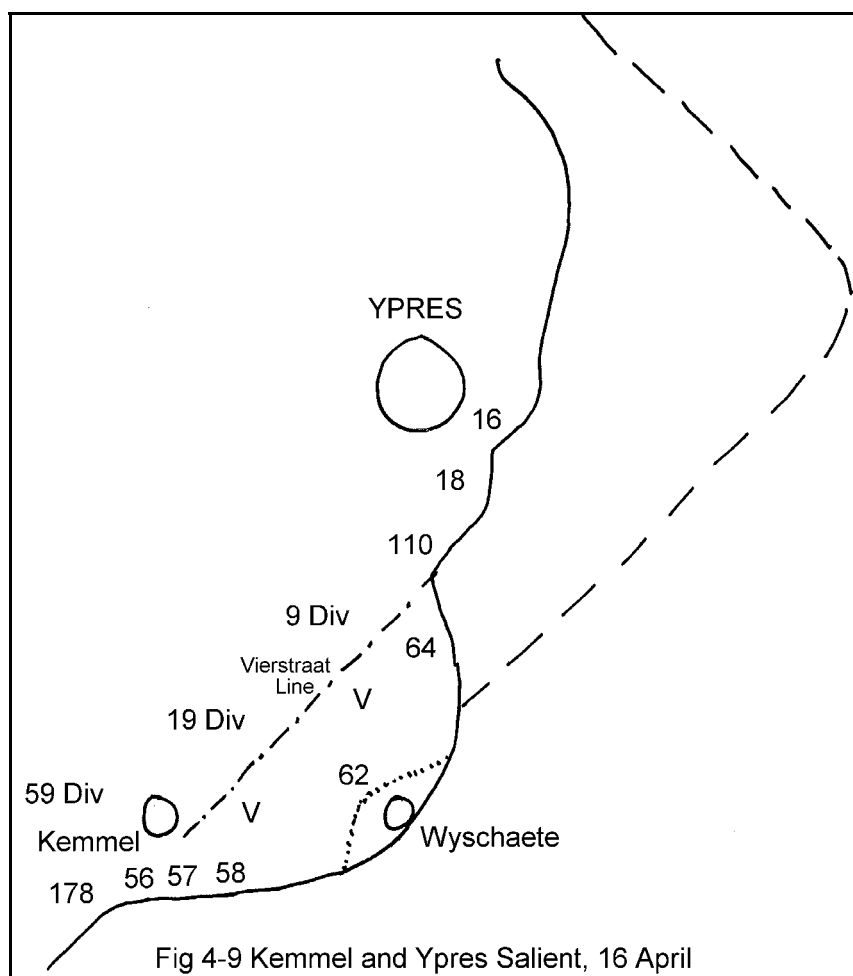
⁵⁰ Wyrall, E, *The West Yorkshire Regiment in the War* (London: Lane, 1924), Vol. II, p. 260.

⁵¹ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 335.

⁵² PRO CAB 45/123: Lieut.-General Godley (GOC XXII Corps) to Edmonds.

⁵³ Croft, *9th (Scottish) Division*, p. 221.

there was no support on their flanks. Godley was perhaps rather foolish to carry out this counter-attack when he could not be sure of half his forces.



The Germans now decided to implement their Tannenberg scheme, a pincer movement either side of Ypres.⁵⁴ By the 17th the British line had come back almost to the walls of the city, so part of the prize, the Ypres salient had been denied the enemy. The capture of Ypres would be a great propaganda coup for the Germans, but more important tactically were the Flanders Hills which gave excellent artillery observation of the whole plain.

The loss of the Messines - Wytschaete ridge and the continuing enemy pressure south of Ypres placed the troops in the Salient in a precarious position. A German attack would draw in reinforcements that the BEF could ill afford to commit, even if they could be found. Plumer had already thinned his line and sent divisions to the Somme

⁵⁴ This was a code-word for the 'Woodfeast' and 'Coursing' schemes devised during the winter of 1917/18.

during March and was holding the ground with the minimum of forces. The defensive schemes drawn up earlier in the year had taken into account the difficulty of holding this ground and most of the Salient had been designated the forward zone. An addendum to OAD 291/29 dealing with the Flesquières and Ypres salients stated that ‘these salients are unsuitable to fight a defensive battle in’.⁵⁵ Plumer had to balance this against the emotive giving of ground, especially in this area which had cost so many British lives the previous year.

Edmonds said very little about the withdrawal from the Salient. This reticence seems strange considering the sheer detail of the rest of the volume. It may be that he wished to keep away from the emotive subject of Passchendaele, but in doing so he missed a chance to comment on good staff work and generalship. A number of decisions were taken, starting on the 11th when the order was given to move back some of the artillery. That evening the clearing of the Salient started, not only of the guns, but also the tons of ammunition dumped ready to feed them together with all the stores and paraphernalia required by a modern army. The forward zone with its defenders and the minimum of artillery support was left as a thin crust, while the main body of the troops prepared the new line. On the 15 April Plumer gave the order for the Outpost garrison to move back to the main line of resistance in front of Ypres. General Harington, Plumer’s MGGS, gives a touching picture of the scene in his biography of his ‘Chief’.⁵⁶ He relates that Plumer was reluctant to give the order and was very affected by the occasion. During the night of the 15/16th the garrison of the forward zone moved back to a position just in front of Ypres. Although everyone would have been aware of the sacrifices made in previous years in these few square miles of Flanders, few would have any regrets at leaving that muddy wasteland, the Ypres salient being a posting that all divisions dreaded. The withdrawal was a complete success, being completed at 4 a.m. when the last troops who were manning the outpost line moved back.

The British withdrawal wrong-footed the Germans and placed a great temptation in their path. The Germans, thinking they had the BEF on the run, decided to bring the date of their attack forward to the 17th and to endeavour to separate the British and Belgians. However, this meant that they would only be able to use four of the eight divisions allocated for the attack as two were busy following up the British and Belgians

⁵⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, Appendix, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Harington, Sir C, *Plumer of Messines* (London: Murray, 1935), p. 161.

and two had not completely detrained.⁵⁷ Also, on the 17th their artillery was still building up its ammunition dumps for the bombardment. So began what the Belgians were to call the Battle of Merckem.

On the 27 March the Belgians had extended their line south, replacing the British 32nd Division with their 10th Division in the Bixschoote sector. They had then moved back a few thousand yards to comply with the British withdrawal from the Ypres salient, the Ypres - Staden railway just south of Langemarck being the inter-army boundary. The high water table meant that the ground was quite unsuitable for deep excavations and many sections of trench were not splinter-proof due to the absence of a parados. Occasional dug-outs from the old German front line were pressed into service, but of course the doors faced the wrong way. It would seem that the Belgians had followed the British defensive doctrine and were organised as: a line of sentry posts, a line of isolated strongpoints, a support trench line and a line of unfinished redoubts.

At dawn on the 17th the Germans bombarded the whole Belgian line and at 8 a.m. attacked from the cover of the Houthulst Forest with four divisions, without the cover of mist, the two divisions, holding the southern six miles.

In the Bixschoote sector the front posts of the Belgian 10th Division were soon overwhelmed, but the Germans were unable to exploit this success due to stout infantry resistance from the support line and artillery fire from both Belgian and British (II Corps) guns. This fire and Belgian counter-attacks forced the Germans to retire and the front line was regained. The Germans had greater initial success against the 3rd Division in the Merckem sector. They broke through and took the strongpoint at Kippe and began to fight their way down the support trench while keeping up a forward pressure. However, fire from the survivors and reserves located on higher ground behind the line brought the attack to a standstill at about mid-day. In the afternoon, Belgian counter-attacks again retrieved the front line.

South of Ypres, the weight of the attack would fall on the 19th Division of XI Corps, defending the Kemmel sector with 178th Brigade (59th Division) and a composite force made up from its own 56th, 57th and 58th Brigades 'co-ordinated' by Brigadier-General TA Cubitt.⁵⁸ Behind these brigades, at the foot of Kemmel Hill, was the Kemmel Defence Force of about 900 men commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Bousfield

⁵⁷ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 354.

⁵⁸ PRO CAB 45/122: TA Cubitt (GOC 57th Brigade) to Edmonds. According to Cubitt, during the battle General Plumer put him in command of nine brigades who called themselves XXXIII Corps.

which had been assembled on the 12th. The defenders had a number of trench systems available to them. Behind the front line, at a distance varying between 1 and 2000 yards, ran the Vierstraat line and a similar distance behind that the Cheapside line. In the northern part of the XXII Corps sector there was a further trench between these two called the Voormezele line.

The German bombardment of the 19th Division started at 6 a.m. and fell mainly on Kemmel Hill rather than the front line. The infantry advance, which started at 8.30, was met with artillery and small arms fire which held it. At 10 a.m. the bombardment switched to the British front line and an hour later another attack was mounted which suffered a similar fate, as did a third attempt at 6.30 p.m. According to Edmonds the Germans claimed to have attacked again the next day (18th) at 4.30 a.m., but as there were no British records of any fighting he concluded that the Germans troops jumping off were hit by their own artillery. Later an attack was mounted that came to nothing.

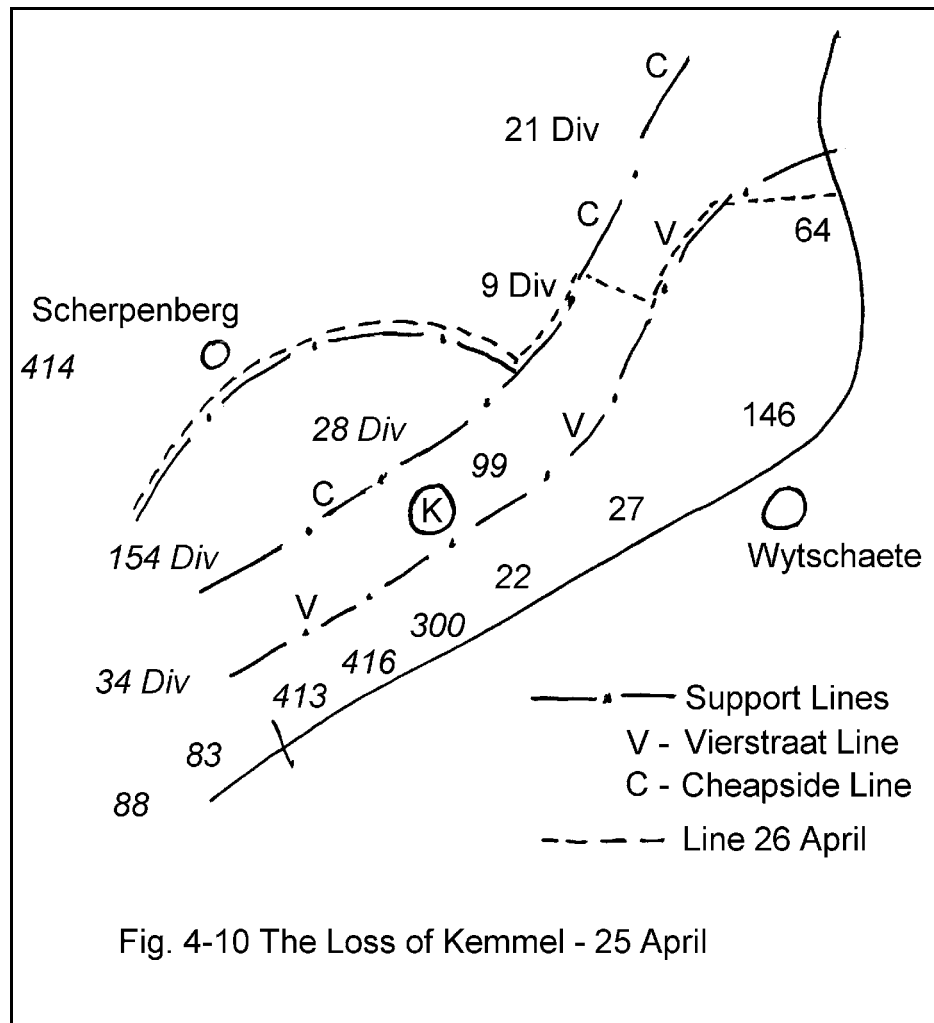
Over the next four days the hard pressed troops of IX Corps were replaced in the line by the French.⁵⁹ The British 19th, 25th and 34th Divisions were relieved by the French 133rd, 34th and 28th Divisions although the British artillery remained as the French guns had yet to arrive.

It was obvious to the Germans that something more than a quick bombardment followed by a rush for the enemy trenches was required if the British or French were going to be dislodged from their defensive positions in the Kemmel sector. The German doctrine was now collapsing. So, there was a lull of five days while the Germans brought up extra divisions, gave those in place a rest and stockpiled ammunition. To enhance their chances of success the crack Alpine Corps were brought up opposite Kemmel.

The sector of front attacked in this second phase was held by three corps, one French and two British. The French XXXVI Corps comprised 28th, 34th, 133rd and 154th Divisions; XXII Corps (Lieut.-General Godley) 9th and 21st Divisions plus the 39th Division Composite Brigade; II Corps (Lieut.-General C Jacob) 6th, 36th and 41st Divisions. The British artillery was learning to keep hidden, most guns were silent only firing during an attack, and the batteries were moved between day and night positions.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ The Kemmel Defence Force remained.

⁶⁰ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, fn p. 410.



At 2.30 a.m. on the 25th April the French Army had its first experience of Bruchmüller's new artillery tactics. In the area around Kemmel occupied by the French 28th Division they were successful in neutralising all the artillery. Under cover of the almost inevitable mist the infantry assault commenced at 6 a.m. after an hour long bombardment of the front line, and one hour later the Lieb Regiment of the Alpine Corps had reached the summit of Kemmel Hill. The story was much the same all along the French front and by 11 a.m. the Germans had halted at the Kemmelbeek stream in the valley behind the hill under the protection of an artillery barrage. The situation was now serious, especially in the 28th Division sector; a breach 5,000 yards wide had been made in the front and there were few reserves available to stem the German tide. At 8 a.m. when it was realised that the front was in trouble, the reserve regiment of the 28th Division, the 99th, was ordered to man the rear line running Locre - Scherpenberg - La Clytte to join with the British. The other two divisions were able to continue this line to

the front near Bailleul with local reserves. In the event the 99th Regiment was only able to man the rear line from Locre to La Clytte and so for many hours a gap of about one mile existed in the line.

The three divisions of XXII Corps had fully utilised the network of defences available to them between their junction with the French and Ypres, and infantry was disposed in depth all along the line. Initially, even the 12th Royal Scots on the French immediate left held the German advance and 'subsequent assaults against the front of the battalion were repulsed with enormous losses to the Boches, and the 12th Royal Scots sent a cheerful message to Brig.-General Croft that all was well'.⁶¹ However, this cheerfulness on the part of the Royal Scots was short-lived as the Germans began to roll up the British front from the south. Although they tried to form a flank with their reserve company they were forced back to the Cheapside line and the battalion was severely mauled, 'by nightfall, after stragglers had come in, only 88 could be mustered'.⁶² In the rear of the Royal Scots the 6th KOSB holding the southern part of the Vierstraat line were soon under attack. The forward two companies suffered heavily, both losing their CO and adjutant early on; the remaining two companies fought their way back to the Cheapside line where they joined the 9th KOYLI.⁶³ In addition, two companies of the 11th Royal Scots, the reserve of the 27th Brigade, and the 8th Black Watch were sent to this critical part of the British line.

The next sector was held jointly by the 64th and 146th Brigades: 1/5th W Yorks, 1st E Yorks, 1/6th W Yorks, with the 1/7th W Yorks in reserve on the Vierstraat line really only a company.⁶⁴ During the morning the front line was penetrated in a number of places by the Germans and the Yorkshire battalions began to break up. In fact, by mid-morning they had been reduced to platoon sized groupings as their casualty figures show. The 1/6th W Yorks and 1st E Yorks could only muster on the Cheapside line 29 and 46 officers and men respectively,⁶⁵ while the 1/5th W Yorks starting the day with 602 officers and men was reduced to 24.⁶⁶ To the left of these Yorkshiremen, the northern limit of the German attack, the Scots of the 26th Brigade held the line and threw a protective flank on their right which held.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Ewing, *Royal Scots*, p. 632.

⁶² Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 418.

⁶³ Gillon, S, *The King's Own Scottish Borderers in the Great War* (London: Nelson, 1930), p. 372.

⁶⁴ Wyrall, *West Yorkshire Regiment*, Vol. II, p. 264.

⁶⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 419.

⁶⁶ Wyrall, *West Yorkshire Regiment*, Vol. II, p. 266.

⁶⁷ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 420.

In summary, the day had not gone too badly for the British, for while the front line had been lost the support lines were still intact. In the north, the Vierstraat Line became the front line, but in the south the situation was not so good as the front line was now the Cheapside line with its right in the air because of the gap between the 9th KOYLI and the French. This gap was probably the best opportunity the Germans had had since the crushing of the Portuguese two weeks before. By exploiting it they would have been in the immediate rear of the Cheapside line, with every chance of widening the breach still further and rolling up a whole section of the British front. The reason for the Germans' failure to seize this chance was fear of counter-attack; also the troops were also under orders 'not to go forward to their final objective until the artillery had been brought up'.⁶⁸ This a far cry from the spirit of 21 March. Clearly the Germans were becoming much more cautious probably due to the stiffer British resistance and their casualties to date.

The German fear of a counter-attack was not groundless, since plans to recover the lost positions were put in motion as soon as Kemmel Hill was lost. The French 39th Division, moving up from the south, was to co-operate with the 25th Division which had received reinforcements, and attack at 5.30 p.m. This may have been French bravado as the division was some 13 miles away west of Poperinghe. Although it started to move at 10.30 a.m. it was still six miles away at 2.30 and so the attack was postponed until the following day. Even British divisions moved slowly and the 25th did not pass under French orders until the late afternoon when, with the 147th Brigade of the 49th Division which had also been moved up, it closed the gap which had been left open by the French.

The muddle continued throughout the night with the objectives of the 25th Division being changed three times. In addition to the advance by the troops under French command the troops of XXII Corps holding the Cheapside line were to advance, presumably to recapture the lost portion of the Vierstraat line. To add to the general confusion it rained heavily all night. The advance of the 25th Division commenced at 3 a.m. with the 7th Brigade on the left, 74th on the right and the 75th in support. The experience of the 3rd Worcesters, 74th Brigade, was typical of the front battalions.

The darkness, the rain and mud made the going so difficult that there was no possibility of keeping up with the barrage. Presently the stumbling troops reached the line of the Kemmelbeek stream; which was found to be a serious obstacle, the banks being very steep. Down one bank,

⁶⁸ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, fn p 415-6, and chapter end note

through the stream, and up the other bank, the platoons struggled as best they could in the dark and the rain.⁶⁹

On the left of the 25th Division the troops moved forward, but with no touch on either flank in the darkness, fog and rain they were forced to return to their starting points. The French 39th Division had hardly moved at all and their experience is best summed up by their official history as quoted by Edmonds:

From the very moment it started its advance struck against infantry strong in numbers and well provided with machine-guns; it hardly did more than pass through the exhausted medley of units holding the front and establish a solid line south-east of the Scherpenberg.⁷⁰

Edmonds attributed the failure of the counter-attack to 'bad staff arrangements, poor artillery support, and the lack of drive exhibited by the French infantry'.⁷¹ To this might be added the atrocious weather and attacking at night with inexperienced troops. Yet. Despite this, the 25th Division had managed to reach its objective. Again Lieut.-General Godley was not impressed. He wrote after the war to Edmonds 'after April 25th when they lost Kemmel, they let us down even worse; when after more études and conferences, they were to retake Kemmel Hill and we were to retake Kemmel Village. They never even started and my 25th Division re-took Kemmel Village and then had to come out of it again owing to their right flank being left open by the French.'⁷²

To the south the French 154th Division was able to hold a series of attacks against its line. Similarly a morning attack against Voormezeele was driven off and even when the intensity of the bombardment was increased in the afternoon the line held.

The Germans successfully attacked the southern part of the Ypres outpost line, which alarmed Second Army sufficiently that the order was given to withdraw to the line of resistance close up to the city ramparts which was accomplished during the night of the 26/27th.

The Germans had one more try to break the Allied line between Bailleul and Ypres, known as the battle of Scherpenberg. After two days of preparations, of which the Allies were aware from interrogating prisoners and deserters, the barrage opened at 3 a.m. on the 29 April, to be answered immediately by a counter-barrage. Even so the German infantry moved off at 5.40. Their only success in the British sector was against

⁶⁹ Stacke, *Worcestershire Regiment*, p. 363.

⁷⁰ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 434.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² PRO CAB 45/123: Lieut.-General Godley (GOC XXII Corps) to Edmonds.

the 89th Brigade which comprised three battalions of the Liverpool Regiment, which had come up on the night of the 27/28th and manned the line around Voormezeele. The 17th King's were forced back to the main line of resistance from the Voormezeele switch, although not before two companies had been surrounded and captured, but again the Germans did not follow. The other two battalions (18th and 19th) kept the Germans at bay mostly by small arms fire as their communications with the artillery had been cut by the bombardment.⁷³

The French line was again broken by the Alpine Corps, despite heavy artillery and small-arms fire. Alarm was then spread by the French command, claiming the loss of Mount Rouge and the Scherpenberg. A personal reconnaissance by Brig.-General Craigie-Halkett (74th Brigade) showed that the hills were unoccupied by either side. Although the 31st Division were called forward to assist the French, the latter were able to put their own house in order and a counter-attack pushed back the Germans almost to their starting point. With this poor German performance the Battles of the Lys rather petered out. Except for the tank battle at Villers Bretonneux on 24 April, this was the last German attempt to break the British line

The battle had been a severe trial for all levels of the BEF. On a number of occasions the Germans had been within an ace of breaking the British front; on the 12th they might have pushed forward to Hazebrouck and on the 27th an exploitable gap was available at Kemmel. These two missed opportunities must be added to the might-have-beens of history. Hazebrouck railway junction was a key part of the British supply network and the Flanders Hills were the gateway to Ypres. While the latter was of no strategic value, the name was known to everyone and its capture would have had enormous propaganda value for the Germans.

The British had used nearly half their divisions in the battle. Of about 60 divisions in the BEF, 27 were to be involved on the Lys.⁷⁴ On the 9 April there were 18 divisions between the La Bassée Canal and the Belgians in the line or reforming. Of these only four had not already been involved in the fighting (29th, 49th, 55th and the 2nd Portuguese), while 14 had been re-built or were in the process of doing so. During the battle nine divisions were moved up from south of the canal, of these six were fresh.

⁷³ Wyrall, *King's Regiment*, Vol. II, p. 651.

⁷⁴ 49 British, 4 Canadian, 5 Australian, 1 New Zealand and 1 Portuguese

The divisions brought in were usually formed up behind the front and the line allowed to come to them, thus the difficult manoeuvre of a relief during a battle was avoided. Of course, there were exceptions; parts of the 61st Division were put straight into the line when they arrived because that was where they were needed. Once committed to the battle divisions and brigades were often broken up and used piecemeal, rather than being used as complete formations or units. For example, the 51st Division, which was the reserve of XI Corps, had the 152nd Brigade under corps orders,⁷⁵ while 154th Brigade was put under the command of 55th Division on the 9th.⁷⁶ Thus for a while the divisional commander, Major-General Carter-Campbell, had only one brigade under his command. There was no reason why the division should not have fought under its general, being next to the 55th in the line. Even Edmonds was critical of this, commenting 'It would have probably have been better to have employed his division as a whole.'⁷⁷ The fault seems to have been with the corps, 'they thought all they had to do was move brigades about.'⁷⁸

There is much evidence that the Germans had problems with logistics, as they did not attack on the whole front, but instead worked their way from south to north, pausing to bring up ammunition. Also, the Germans' transport arrangements were very bad and the condition of the animals was poor'.⁷⁹ These difficulties were compounded by the numerous damaged bridges over the Lys and its canals.⁸⁰ Added to this was the continuous attacks by the RAF on any target behind the German lines.

A study of the way the German advance was stopped may give a clue to fighting the defensive battle with few reserves. The key was firepower, especially artillery, coupled with a good position. However, on occasions this was not enough, as by sheer weight of numbers the Germans were able to break through the front line. But they were then stopped by another requirement - a rear defensive line. This often bought sufficient time for reserves to be brought up and the German advance to be stopped. They then had the problem of getting the battle mobile again, which was never properly achieved. This would not have worked as a front-line defence as the German artillery firepower was then superior. The intangible factor in all this was the morale of the troops on both sides. Lack of success coupled with heavy casualties seem to have

⁷⁵ Bewsher, *51st Division*, p. 298.

⁷⁶ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 169.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ PRO CAB 45/125: A Symons (GSO1 51st Division) to Edmonds

⁷⁹ PRO CAB 45/122: J Dick-Cunningham (GOC 152nd Brigade, 51st Division) to Edmonds

dampened the Germans' enthusiasm and made them more cautious, whereas the British determination to see the battle through to the end must have helped.

When the Germans reached the British back areas they entered a land of milk and honey. Accounts of the fighting on the Somme usually quote Rudolf Binding's description of the looting of Albert and there was a repeat performance on the Lys.⁸¹ The problem is to ascertain how widespread this was. Most examples come from the Merville district which was used by the BEF as a depot and hospital area. Two of Edmonds' correspondents specifically mentioned intoxicated Germans in their accounts. Captain PW Clark related how a captured German gave the information that the Grand Place in Estaires was full of his countrymen sleeping off the effects of their looting, so the British artillery was turned on them.⁸² Two Germans singing at the tops of their voices staggered into the 5th Division's line after having found the 'EF Canteen and its whisky'.⁸³ From the German side, Westman related how the troops 'had found huge depots of wines and spirits, and each man had taken a bottle of whisky or the like, and had constantly sipped it as though it was lemonade'.⁸⁴ As a doctor Westman also marvelled at the quantity and quality of the medical stores he came across, even such seemingly mundane items as cotton bandages, gauze and rubber gloves being worthy of comment. What the Germans may have found was the quartermaster's rum store.⁸⁵ In the front line - when the divisional commander allowed it - the men were given a tot of rum at stand-to. Taking into account the number of men involved there must have been thousands of gallons in storage.⁸⁶

Not all the looting was done by the Germans. The Chateau at La Motte au Bois north of Merville was used as a corps and divisional headquarters as described in chapter 5. The owner, Baroness de la Grange, moved to Paris in early March where she received news that her 'treasures' were in danger; accompanied by Lieut.-General de Lisle (GOC XV Corps) she visited her home to retrieve the contents of her safe. Thinking to reward the XV Corps staff with some of her famous 1808 brandy she found that the wine cellar was bare.⁸⁷ The culprits must have worn khaki as the chateau

⁸⁰ PRO CAB 45/123: G Finch (XV Corps Q) to Edmonds

⁸¹ For example, Pitt, B, *1918 The Last Act* (London: Corgi Edition, 1965), p. 107.

⁸² PRO CAB 45/122: Capt. PW Clark (Signals 61st Division, XI Corps) to Edmonds.

⁸³ PRO CAB 45/124: JA Kendall (1st DCLI, 95th Bde, 5th Division) to Edmonds.

⁸⁴ Westman, *Surgeon*, pp. 158-9.

⁸⁵ Given that the British other ranks were not allowed wine or spirits the officers do seem to have had an enormous amount of liquor stored for their consumption.

⁸⁶ A rough calculation gives a daily consumption of about 100 gallons.

⁸⁷ Grange, Baroness de la, *Open House in Flanders* (London: Murray, 1929).

remained in Allied hands for the whole war.

Of course, these tales of drunkenness made good anecdotes, but the real find for the German soldiers was something much more mundane, food. As they penetrated the back areas they found the BEF's larder, huge stores of tinned goods, white bread and fresh meat. By 1918 Germany was really hungry, as a combination of the Royal Navy's blockade and the deteriorating condition of the country's rolling stock meant that imports had ceased and supplies from the East could not be moved to the cities. Even though the troops received the best, their rations were poor compared with the British, between three and four thousand calories per day.⁸⁸ It should also be remembered that young men eat enormous amounts, as anyone with teenage sons will testify. Middlebrook quotes a number of German soldiers' complaints about their rations and stories of pilfered food.⁸⁹ While it is not unusual for soldiers to consider the army's property their own, they would have to have been hungry to bother with 'winning' bread and potatoes. These letters also show that the Germans expected to find food and drink and there is evidence that the looting was organised as well as opportunistic. Colonel-General von Eunem, GOC Third Army, said at the end of June after the offensives against the French, 'One motive for the bravery of our infantry in this attack is the lust for plunder.' A guards division suggested the formation of a 'booty platoon' in every battalion to prevent arbitrary actions while securing the spoils for the battalion in question.⁹⁰

The British troops on the other hand were very well fed. In the front line it was mainly bully beef and biscuits, but also available were tinned stew, bacon and jam. To drink there was tea and cocoa, not insipid brown powder but whole beans roasted, crushed, mixed with sugar and arrowroot pressed and stamped out in large thick slabs.⁹¹ For smokers there seems to have been a never ending supply of 'gaspers'.⁹² As if this were not enough some men and certainly many officers received parcels from home and in back areas many French women with a few chickens made a living selling 'egg and chips'. Of course, institutional food soon becomes boring but there were few complaints from the British side about hunger and often men fed better in the army than they did at home.

⁸⁸ Anon., *German Army Handbook April 1918* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1977).

⁸⁹ Middlebrook, *The Kaiser's Battle*, pp. 61-2 and 359.

⁹⁰ Deist, W, 'The Military Collapse of the German Empire', *War in History*, Vol. 3, No.2, (1996), p. 200.

⁹¹ Probably Royal Naval in origin, known to them as 'kye'.

⁹² According to contemporary newspapers tobacco could be sent to the troops duty-free.

The breakdown in discipline in the German Army is usually considered to have started with the looting during the Spring Offensives. Although some disaffection had started during the preceding winter the morale of the troops was high and the training and preparations for the battle made them expect great things. When all that materialised was a lot of casualties for no strategic gain the rot began to set in. In fact, the Germans gained nothing from their offensives against the British except a lot of territory they did not need, a longer front and no shelter equivalent to the strong defensive lines they had left.

The issuing of OAD291/29 was not the last directive to be issued by GHQ on defence. On the 19 April, General Foch issued a directive on the defensive battle.⁹³ In it he insisted on a foot by foot defence organised in two lines 'using a series of defensive organisations and numerous and powerful artillery'. The counter-attack troops were not to be just thrown in as this was usually a dead loss. Rather they should be a separate body with objectives and artillery support. Reserve troops were to be ready to man the second line to 'ensure that troops retiring are stopped there'. This does pre-suppose that the BEF has sufficient troops to form these counter-attack and reserve formations.

This directive was sent by General Horne to his subordinates on 21 April. In a later letter to Lieut.-General Maxse (XVIII Corps) he reinforced these principles pointing out that the ground occupied was to be held, although the front line could be manned lightly while the main garrison should hold the rear defensive lines. In addition the front was to be protected by 'well organised artillery and machine-gun barrages'.⁹⁴

Meanwhile, in May 1918 GHQ published SS210 *The Division in Defence* which was reinforced by a memorandum from Haig to his army commanders dated 7 June.⁹⁵ Like OAD291/29, SS210 lays down principles rather than practical advice and there is ample evidence that it was prepared before the spring battles. The use of 'forward' rather than 'outpost' was changed in January 1918,⁹⁶ yet on page 20 'outpost' was used when describing the disposition of troops. These dispositions refer to twelfths of the infantry in the division and not ninths as one would expect in May 1918 after the infantry re-organisation. Yet tantalisingly the disposition shows one brigade in forward

⁹³ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 519-20.

⁹⁴ IWM, Horne MSS, 73/60/2: Horne - Maxse, 9 May 1918. A note about the directive was pencilled on the letter.

⁹⁵ IWM, Dawnay MSS, 69/21/6: Memorandum on Defensive Measures, 7 June 1918.

⁹⁶ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 42.

zone, one on the main line of resistance and one in the battle zone. The memo gives two lessons to be learned from the recent fighting; the forward zone should be one mile in front of the main battle position and that when an attack was likely men should be withdrawn from the forward zone although it should be able to withstand large raids. Both SS210 and the memo were clear that there should be no retirement without orders from above; the memo states that: 'It remains as true as ever that for all troops actually allotted to the defence of any position, there is, subject to any orders which they may receive from superior authority, only one degree of resistance, and that is to the last round and to the last man'. On the other hand it points out the importance of commanders knowing which positions may be given up; although this might appear a contradiction it means that front-line commanders were beginning to be allowed some flexibility. Thus, GHQ were learning the error of packing the front line. It is probable that SS210 was prepared soon after OAD291/29, but edited before publication in May.

In October 1918 GHQ issued a version of SS196 *Diagrams of Field Defences* which shows that the BEF had learned to move the main line of resistance to the rear.⁹⁷ The layout was very much like that used by De Lisle at Arras on 28 March. The front system was to comprise two lines; the first, a line of posts or shell holes wired round with continuous wire in front; the second, 150-300 yards behind was to comprise a trench with Lewis gun support posts also with wire in front. The main line of resistance was to be 1000-4000 yards behind and similar to the front system, but with machine-guns in front firing direct. As the war ended one month later it was, of course, untested.

The BEF did learn one practical lesson from the March fighting which was applied on the Lys, that is, that troops falling back will not rally on a prepared line unless it is manned. In addition, they found it was often a waste to slot reserve divisions into the battle where the position may have been a poor one for defence. Better to man a good defensive position behind the front and allow the troops to fall back onto it.

When the troops had been pushed out of their defence zones they lost the use of the communication system that had been built up over the previous three years. All the levels of the command structure from the front-line dugout to GHQ were connected by a telegraph and telephone system. Commanders had become very used to this very simple and safe method of communicating with their adjacent levels in the hierarchy. Wireless sets had become much more reliable and less cumbersome and were used to supplement the telephone from brigade upwards. However, the RFC and the RA made the greatest

tactical use of this new invention; one of the original uses for aircraft was artillery spotting and it was by now quite usual for the RFC to direct artillery shoots using wireless calls.⁹⁸ On the ground, the destructive power of both sides' artillery meant that overhead (air) lines were useless anywhere near the front, and so, much work had been put into buried cables, command posts and telephone exchanges. The point where these cables came up to the surface and were thus more vulnerable were one of the main targets of the German bombardment. The First and Second Armies were perhaps better served by these buried cables as they were often laid as a preliminary to a major battle. Edmonds specifically mentions the system around Messines laid for the offensive there in 1917. The BEF became reliant on this buried system: 'It is impossible to overestimate the value of direct verbal and telegraphic communications between infantry and artillery and between commanders during battle: it engenders confidence.'⁹⁹

This ability to communicate was the cement that held the components of the BEF's weapons system together. Once broken, the fighting ability of the higher formations degraded into a large number of independent small units and orders took hours to reach their destination, and were usually out of date by the time they arrived, while commanders had little idea of what was happening at the front. For example, the shell that destroyed the headquarters of the Portuguese Corps at dawn on 9 April contributed as much to the confusion as the retreating troops. Confusion did not necessarily require a break in the wires. The air/artillery co-operation broke down during the retreat of the Fifth Army, since many batteries did not erect their aerials when they halted and consequently zone calls from aircraft observers went unheeded, which resulted in some bad feeling.¹⁰⁰ Once away from the buried system the divisions were 'dependant on the mobile field equipment of signal units: the telephone system which could be provided was restricted and precarious'.¹⁰¹ However, the signal units managed to keep things stitched together. Cable sections worked at night 'competing with unforeseen moves of divisional HQ'.¹⁰² The war diaries of these signal units tell the story in more detail. For example, the 31st Division signals were moved forty miles on the 10th and spent the next four days keeping the lines open between corps, division and the infantry and artillery brigades, although it took three days to get everything

⁹⁷ General Staff, *Diagrams of Field Defences*, IWM/Battery Press Reprint (SS196).

⁹⁸ The RFC became the RAF on 1st April 1918.

⁹⁹ PRO CAB 45/123: HEW Edwards (IX Corps Signals) to Edmonds.

¹⁰⁰ Jones HA, *The War in the Air*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), Vol. IV, p. 358-9.

¹⁰¹ PRO CAB 45/123: R Chevenix-Trench to Edmonds.

connected together as the lines were continuously broken by shell-fire.¹⁰³

The casualty figures for the Spring Offensives give the lie to the myth that the defender suffers less than the attacker.¹⁰⁴ The Allies lost 330,000 men between 21 March and 30 April, while the corresponding figure for the Germans was 348,000.¹⁰⁵ However, the British figures contain 76,000 men who were made prisoner, while many German wounded would return to fight later in the year. For the Lys, Edmonds gave the British figure of 82,000, no German figures being available. Thus as far as casualties were concerned, the Spring Offensives were no different from the other Great War battles; both sides lost about the same number of men. One of the highest British unit casualty figures was that of the 4th Guards Brigade, 1451 out of 2020 who went into battle. This action will be looked at in the next chapter.

¹⁰² PRO CAB 45/123: AH French (XI Corps Signals) to Edmonds.

¹⁰³ PRO WO 95/2352: 31st Division Signals Company War Diary.

¹⁰⁴ For example, see Hankey, *The Supreme Command*, Vol. II, p. 802-3.

¹⁰⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 493.

Chapter 5

THE 4TH GUARDS BRIGADE AND THE DEFENCE OF HAZEBROUCK

In his despatch of 20 July 1918, which describes the fighting on the Lys, Sir Douglas Haig wrote:

The performance of all troops engaged in this most gallant stand, and especially that of the 4th Guards Brigade, on whose front of more than 4000 yards the heaviest attacks fell, is worthy of the highest praise. No more brilliant exploit has taken place since the opening of the enemy's offensive, though gallant actions have been without number.¹

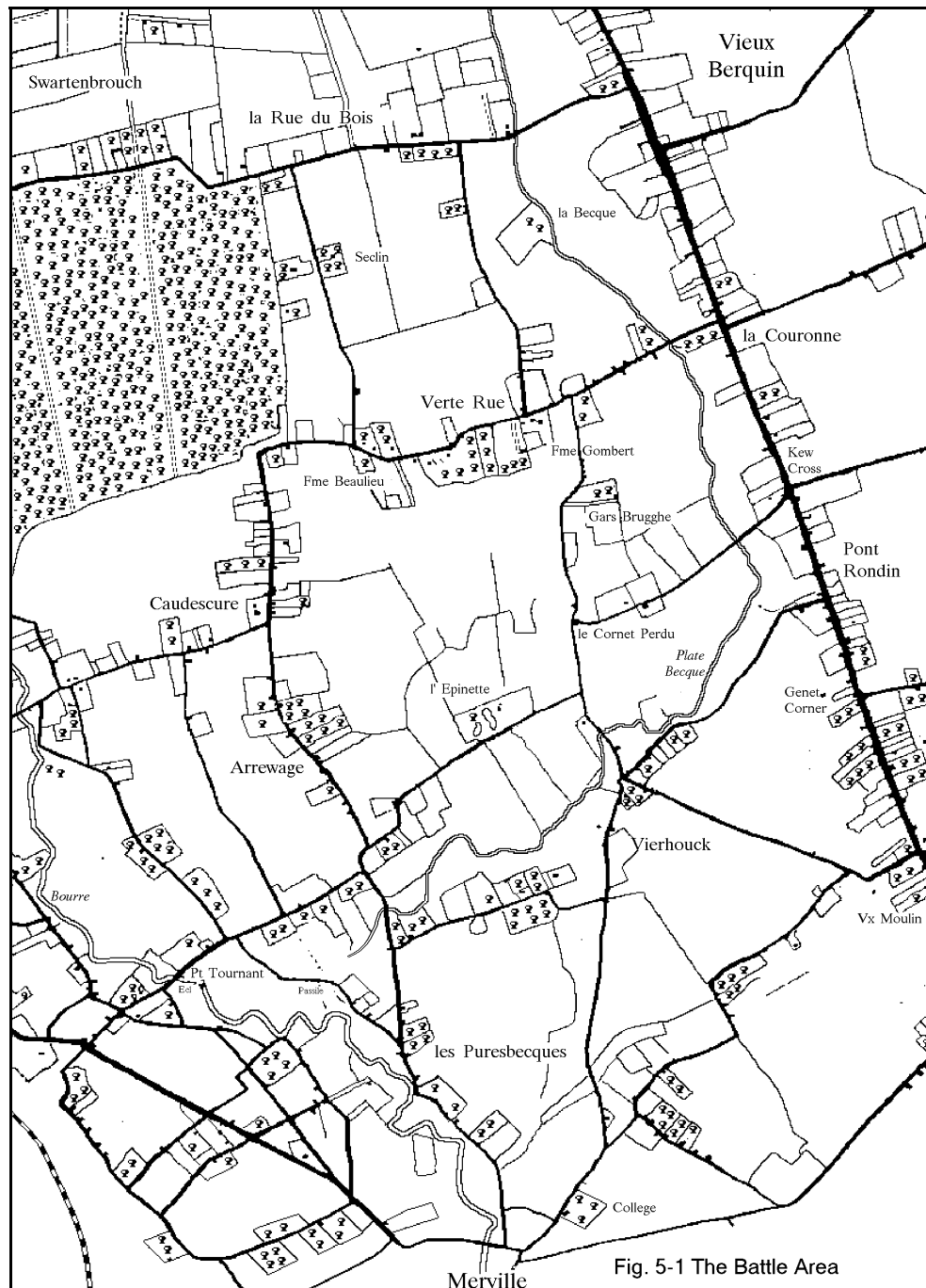
This chapter will analyse in detail the action referred to by Haig, and it will be used to see how prepared one unit was for mobile warfare.

Before moving onto the battle itself, it is worth looking at the topography which has changed little in the past eighty years. The area is roughly one mile square, the north-western edge being the Bois d'Aval, part of the Nieppe forest, even today very dense woodland. In the north-east corner is the village of Vieux Berquin. The western edge is the river Bourre, at the time used for barge traffic between the Lys and Hazebrouck, about ten feet wide and crossed in the north by a lifting bridge called Pont Tournant, which was only replaced in 1990, probably the last survivor of the battle. There was a lock adjacent to Pont Tournant and a footbridge further downstream of which nothing remains today. The eastern edge is a straight road that runs between Estaires and Vieux Berquin. In the south is the Plate Becque stream about four feet wide and crossed by two bridges. The country is very flat, crossed by drainage ditches and highly cultivated with many small farms. In 1918, there were orchards attached to the farms and the remnants are still visible today. Except for the farm buildings there are no natural defensive positions.

The regimental histories often refer to places as hamlets, but even this may be considered a little too grandiose, as they are really two or three farms grouped near each

¹ Boraston, J, *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches* (London: Dent, 1920), p. 227.

other. The only habitation of any size is Caudescure which boasts a church and café. The road between Neuf Berquin and Vieux Berquin is now one continuous development; places such as Pont Rondin and La Couronne are not identified. The town of Merville is visible from most of the area; for most of the war it had been a rest and stores centre. Like most of the area, much of it was destroyed during this and



subsequent fighting.

According to an account of the battle written by Major Trappes-Lomax many of the place names on the Royal Engineers map used at the time were incorrect.² The farm where the Grenadiers set up their headquarters during the night of 11/12th is named Gars Brugghe; this is not a place name at all, but describes the tract of land between the main road and the forest, the correct name being Ferme Gombert. To confuse matters this name is given to the farm to the south of Verte Rue which was actually called Ferme Beaulieu, the name given to the farm some 1000 yards to the west where the Grenadiers spent the night of 12/13th. All this was determined by officers returning to the scene of the battle during the early 1930's. In keeping with the other published sources the following narrative will use the 'traditional' place-names. Reference to the French Institut Géographique National (IGN) map of the area produces some more mysteries. The large house called L'Epinette which figures in the Coldstream story is shown as a château and the name L'Epinette refers to the cross-roads between Caudescure and Les Puresbecques. During a visit to the battlefield in 1991 the author spoke to the lady who lived in the house. Apparently L'Epinette was the name of a café at the southern end of Arrewage of which there is no trace today. Some of the names of other landmarks sound suspiciously like cafés i.e. la Couronne - The Crown. Le Collège to which the brigade were supposed to advance on the 12th is an imposing ecclesiastical building even today; in those days it stood on its own, but now Merville has surrounded it.

The 4th Guards Brigade was commanded by Brig.-General Hon. LJP Butler who had recently taken over from Brigadier-General Lord Ardee, the latter having been badly gassed. The three battalions in the brigade were the 4th Grenadier, 3rd Coldstream and 2nd Irish Guards, who were commanded by Lieut.-Colonels WS Pilcher, F Longueville and HRLG Alexander³ respectively.

The brigade was resting in billets some twenty miles away near Tinqes, when the German assault on the Lys commenced. On the 10 April there was a full ceremonial inspection of all three battalions by the GOC 31st Division, Major-General Bridgford,⁴ at the football ground in Tinqes. The brigade war diary reports that he expressed great

² Grenadier Guards Archives: *The 4th Guards Brigade in Front of Hazebrouck*, Major T Trappes-Lomax, (1935).

³ Later Field Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis.

⁴ He was sacked shortly after the battle. NAM, Bridgford MSS, 9204-174: Manuscript account.

admiration for the smart appearance of all ranks.⁵ Later that day orders were received that they were to be moved by London busses from Tinquies, sixty kilometres in a semi-circle to a position north of Merville.⁶ In the confusion their busses were twelve hours late, so the troops had to spend a tiring night by the roadside waiting and had no proper breakfast, as the cookers had already gone with the transport. Such was the situation on the roads, crowded with refugees and retreating troops, that the journey to their destination took ten hours.

A staff car met the column and took the brigadier-general and the brigade-major, Captain Oliver Lyttleton,⁷ to see the GOC XV Corps, Lieut.-General Sir Beauvoir de Lisle, at his headquarters in a château at La Motte, a small village on the northern edge of the Bois d'Aval, leaving Lieut.-Colonel Alexander in command of the brigade. Here they were appraised of the latest German successes and the supposed position of British troops in the area, although precise information was scarce. The General was aware of the gap between the 29th and 50th Divisions around the village of Vieux Berquin, which included the important Estaires - Hazebrouck road. The 4th Guards Brigade were the only troops available to plug this gap, and so they were instructed to deploy as quickly as possible to deny the enemy the route to the important town of Hazebrouck and thence the road to the sea. Most sources are agreed that the corps commander's parting words were something like 'unless you do something before morning there will be no more fox hunting'.⁸ The brigadier-general and the brigade-major then left at about 6.15 p.m. to walk the four miles to the brigade debussing point at Strazeele, about a mile north of Vieux Berquin.

At about this time Lieut.-General de Lisle also issued an order that 'no retirement must be made without an order in writing, signed by a responsible officer, who must be prepared to justify his action before a court-martial'⁹. How much this affected thinking during the battle is not known.

The brigade debussed during the evening of the 11th at Strazeele where they met up with their transport and marched to Le Paradis just south of the Hazebrouck - Bailleul railway, about one mile north of Vieux Berquin, arriving at about 9.30 p.m. While moving south intelligence was received from stragglers moving to the rear that

⁵ PRO WO 95/1225: War Diary, 4th Guards Brigade, 9 April 1918.

⁶ Some accounts say lorries.

⁷ Created Viscount Chandos of Aldershot in 1954.

⁸ He was a keen fox hunter and polo player.

⁹ PRO WO 95/1226: 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards, Staff ride document (undated).

the enemy was advancing up the road from Neuf Berquin and so No. 1 Company of the Coldstream under Captain JAC Whitaker was sent forward to Vieux Berquin to cover the important cross roads there.¹⁰ At about midnight Brigadier-General Butler called a conference of his battalion commanders and gave orders for the disposition of their troops. The Coldstream were to be on the right, the Grenadiers on their left with the Irish Guards in reserve. There are some differences between the sources about these positions, it would seem that the original positions were chosen at the conference and then changed by a later message.¹¹ The line had to be chosen from the map there being no time for reconnaissance. The No 2 Company Irish Guards, under Captain Bambridge was sent down the Strazeele - Neuf Berquin road to act as an advanced guard for the brigade.¹² The 12th Battalion Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry were ordered by division, on the evening of the 11th, to cover the cross-roads at La Couronne to Bleu and endeavour to gain touch with the 95th Brigade on their left flank. 12 KOYLI were a New Army battalion, originally called the Halifax Pals, who were the pioneer battalion of the 31st Division. They were moved into the line to support the hard pressed infantry and had been practising in musketry for the previous weeks. 152 Brigade Royal Field Artillery, who were actually part of the 34th Division, had their 18 pdr batteries south of the Bois d'Aval. A Forward Observation Officer, Lieut. Lewis, was established with his telephone link at the Grenadier Guards battalion HQ. This was all the artillery support the brigade would have during the next two days. The brigade trench mortar battery was left at Strazeele and are not heard of until the afternoon of the 13th. At some time two sections (8 guns) of the 31st Division Machine Gun Battalion were placed under the command of the brigade.

There were other British troops in front of the 4th Guards Brigade line. The remnants of the 150th Brigade were north of Les Puresbecques, while to the west of them 149th Brigade held a line from Vierhouck to Genet Corner. The OC of the 1/6th Northumberland Fusiliers (149th Brigade), Major Temperley, sent a message to the brigade: 'I am holding on alright [sic] round VIERHOUCK with about 50 to 60 men. Could hold them up with help. Troops all round have retired.'¹³

¹⁰ Lieut. (Acting Captain) JAC Whitaker, wounded and captured during the advance on the morning of the 12th.

¹¹ PRO WO 95/1226: 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards, Messages, BMS169, Brigade to Battalions, 12 April.

¹² Captain GC Bambridge, wounded in the leg on the 12th.

¹³ PRO WO 95/1226: Coldstream messages.

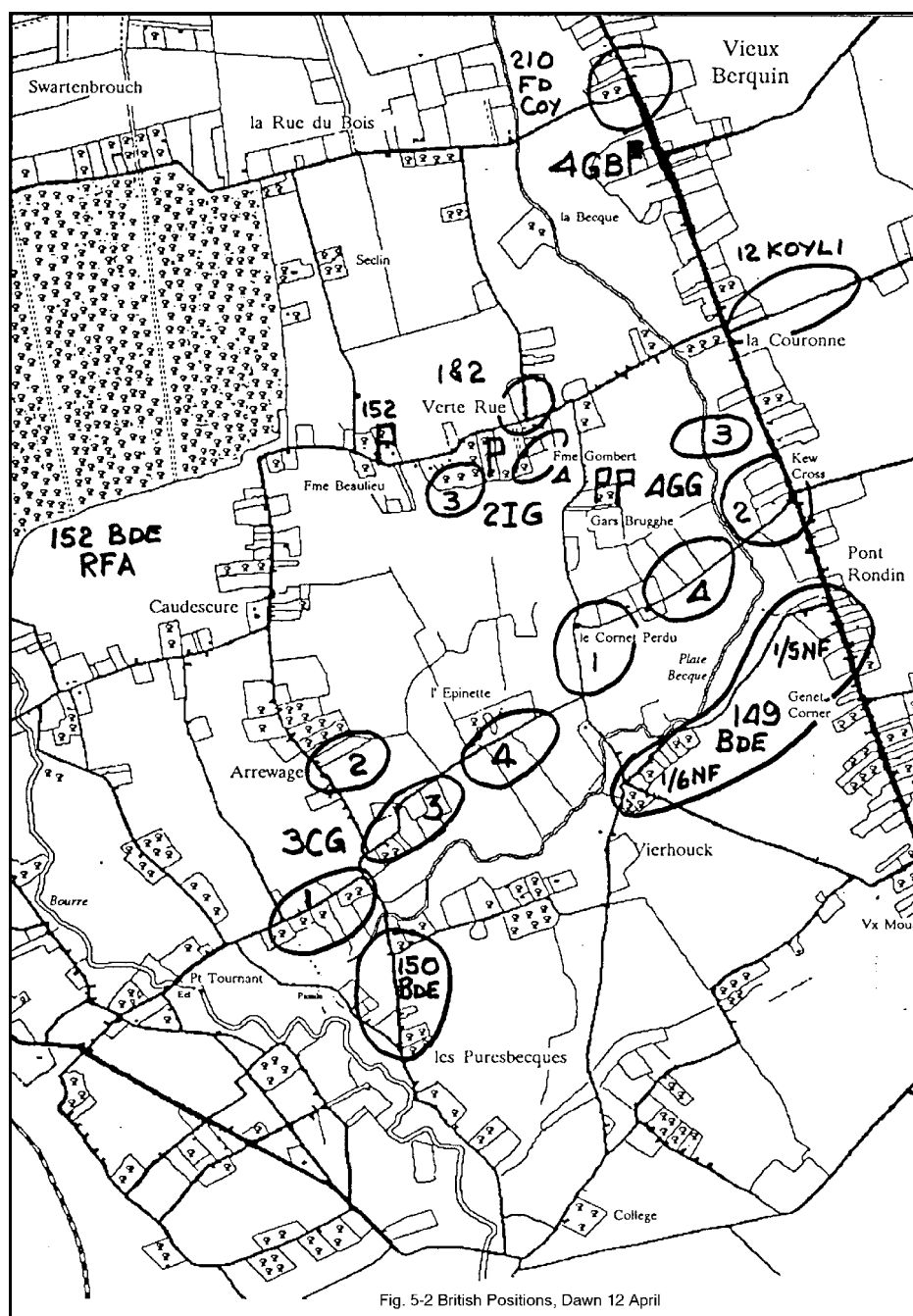


Fig. 5-2 British Positions, Dawn 12 April

The Germans were also making their preparations; in all ten battalions of infantry plus numerous field-guns would attack the three Guards battalions over the next two days. The German 87th Brigade (35th Division) were to advance up the Neuf Berquin to Vieux Berquin road with the objective of capturing the latter; it proposed to use all its three regiments - 141st, 176th and 61st - in the attack. To the west the German 16th Brigade (8th Division) was to capture the Bois d'Aval and thence to Hazebrouck. Two of its regiments were to be used in the attack - 72nd and 93rd - with

the 153rd in reserve.

The position was by no means ideal. No-one had any idea where the front line lay or the strength of the enemy and what, if any, troops were on the brigade flanks. A shortage of tools meant that the troops were insufficiently dug in when dawn broke and again no breakfasts had been received. The lack of tools was to cause serious problems over the next two days.

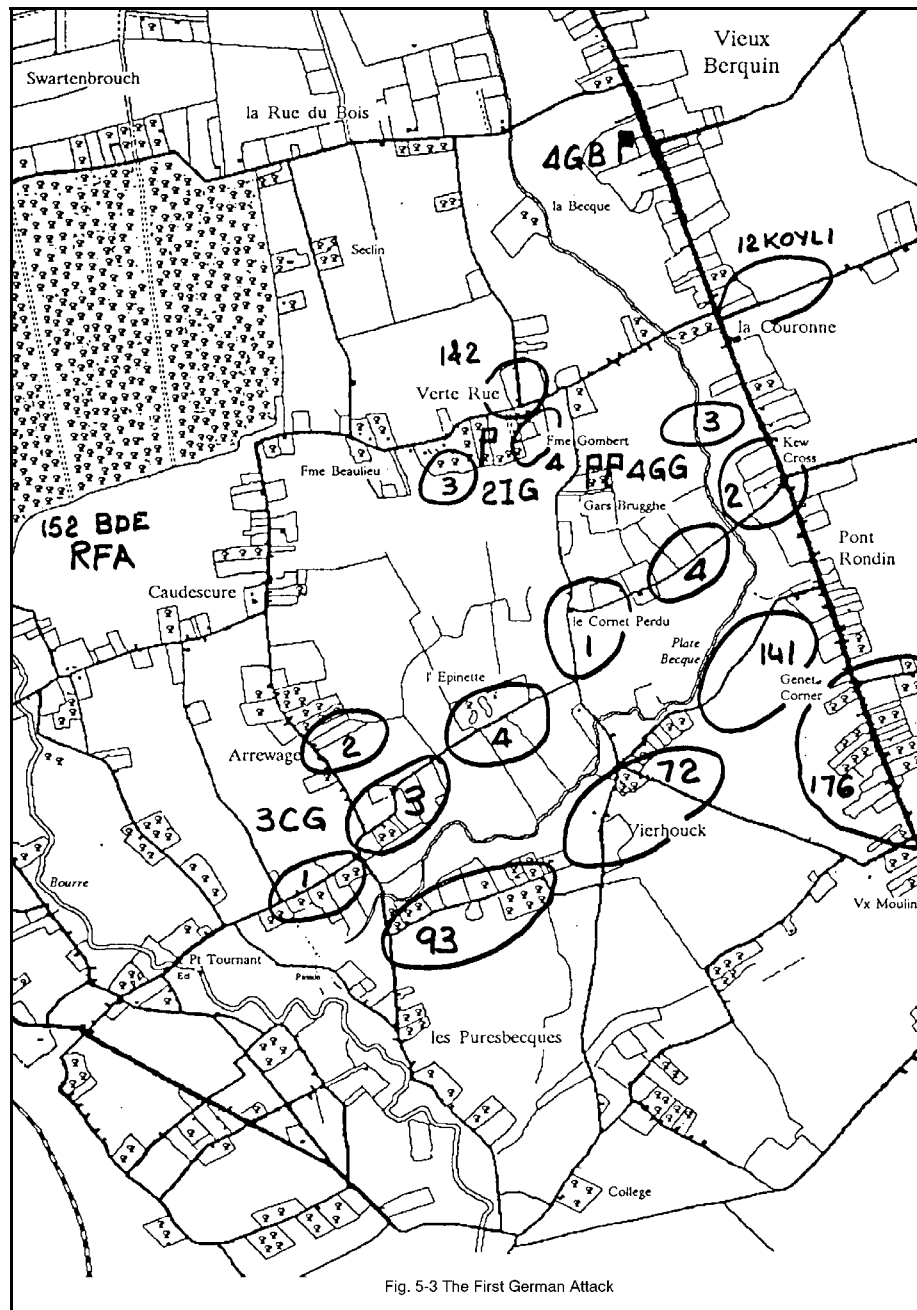
After a dark cold night, the 12th broke fine and clear with a sky full of enemy observation balloons which were to give the RAF some good sport, five being downed in the Merville sector alone.¹⁴ Immediately the Germans attacked in great numbers along the whole front with artillery and machine-gun support. Their attack first fell on the remains of the 149th and 150th Brigades who were exhausted, having been in action and retreating since the 10th. Before 9.00 a.m. the 150th Brigade was forced back to the north-west by the German 93rd Regiment, leaving the way clear to the Coldstream, where their progress was halted. The 1/6th Northumberland Fusiliers put up a splendid resistance against the German 72nd Regiment and held on until between 10.00 and 10.30 a.m. when their ammunition ran out and they were forced to surrender. The 1/4th and 1/5th Northumberland Fusiliers were forced back through the Grenadier's lines, where some of them stayed, by the German 141st Regiment. At 9.00 a.m. the Germans established a line some 400 yards from No. 2 Company of the Grenadiers.

Meanwhile, at dawn the Guards began to assess their situation, Captain Pryce¹⁵ on the Grenadier's left flank reported that: 'It will not be possible to get a line better than the present one, which is bad, without going right in front of the village or demolishing several buildings which would entail much labour and could only be done by night.'¹⁶ Patrols from both front battalions were sent out to form an outpost line, but were fired on by the Germans and had to retire back to the main line of resistance. The Germans then began to consolidate their position in front of the Guards' line before mounting an attack.

¹⁴ Smith Jr, M, *World War I in the Air* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977), pp. 239-40.

¹⁵ Captain TT Pryce, killed on the 13th.

¹⁶ Grenadier Guards Archive. Pryce message timed at 8 a.m. All Pryce's messages are from this source.



At 8.20 a.m. 31st Division telephoned Brigadier-General Butler and informed him that troops of 50th Division were reported between Vierhouck and Pont Rondin and also on the south bank of the River Bourre, mid-way between Merville and Les Puresbecques, and that Les Puresbecques was unoccupied. The order was given for the 4th Guards Brigade to secure a line from Le Collège to the road junction south of Genet Corner and prevent movement along the Neuf Berquin road. Brigadier-General Butler had a problem. While his instructions from the corps commander were quite explicit, to plug the gap until the Australians arrived, he must also have been aware that the brigade

had not joined with other troops on either flank. His next step was very sensible. He visited his battalion commanders to obtain first hand information about the situation. While walking between the battalion HQ he heard the sound of the German attack, and his discussions with the two front-line battalion commanders confirmed this.

The plan was for the Coldstream and Grenadiers to advance at 11.00 a.m. to their objective with two companies of the Irish Guards in echelon on the right flank to give protection and try to link up with the 50th Division,¹⁷ while 152nd Brigade RFA was to put down a barrage on the Neuf Berquin - Merville road.¹⁸ It would seem that Brigadier-General Butler gave verbal orders to his battalion commanders who passed them on to the companies by written message. There is ample evidence that some of these messages either did not arrive or were late. For example, a Coldstream message began 'Your message only reached me at 11.15 a.m. owing to orderly being wounded'.¹⁹ Captain Pryce's message was also late in arriving; he reported to his adjutant 'Your SD7 received at 11.5 a.m. Am moving at 11.15'. All this was confirmed after the war. Captain Whitaker, OC No. 1 Company, Coldstream Guards, wrote to Edmonds that 'No. 1 Company was the only one to attack as the others did not receive the order until after 11.00 a.m.'. ²⁰

The attempted forward movement was a failure. For an advance to be successful it would have been necessary to capture and hold the two bridges over the Plate Becque as the 1500 yards to the new position was over open ground. No. 1 Company of the Coldstream who were on the right flank gained the Plate Becque, an advance of 400 yards, but were forced to withdraw, due to fierce enemy fire from Les Puresbecques and the orchards south-west of Vierhouck. The intelligence given to the brigade by divisional HQ was completely out of date. According to Whitaker he 'knew that there were machine-guns (at least 6) in Les Puresbecques'.²¹ On the Grenadier's right, No. 1 Company pushed their two platoons down the road to Vierhouck. They were met by intense fire suffering heavy casualties and did not manage to cross the Plate Becque. On the far left No. 2 Company of the Grenadiers reached Pont Rondin, their objective. Led by their company commander, Captain TT Pryce, they worked their way from house to house, against fierce opposition. While they were doing this they were continuously

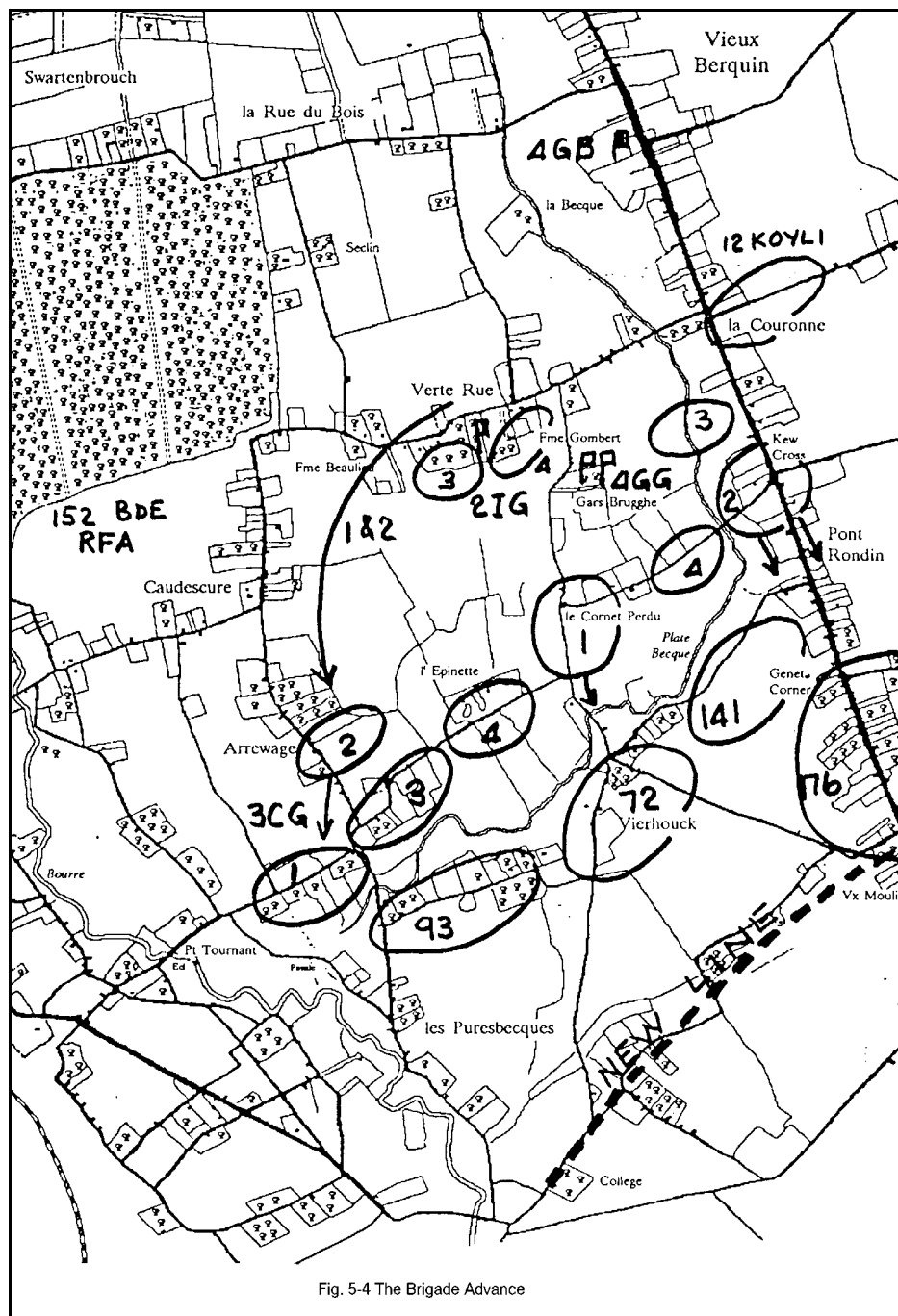
¹⁷ No. 1 (Lieut. FSL Smith) and No. 2 (Capt. GC Bambridge).

¹⁸ According to their war diary they spent the 12th moving to new positions, they fired 3407 rounds on the 12th and 2057 on the 13th.

¹⁹ PRO WO 95/1226: Coldstream messages, Captain Elwes OC No. 4 Company to Battalion HQ.

²⁰ PRO CAB 45/122: JAC Whitaker to Edmonds (wrongly filed)

shot at by a battery of field guns located 300 yards south of Pont Rondin, firing over open sights. Thus the picture created in Oliver Lyttleton's autobiography of 'the two battalions advancing in perfect order' is completely false.²²



Brigadier-General Butler received no advantage from his abortive forward movement. In fact he was in a much weaker position. No. 1 Company of the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Chandos, *Memoirs*, p. 95.

Coldstream had lost all three officers,²³ and was reduced to about 40 men under Sergeant Vickers, who was the acting CSM at the time.

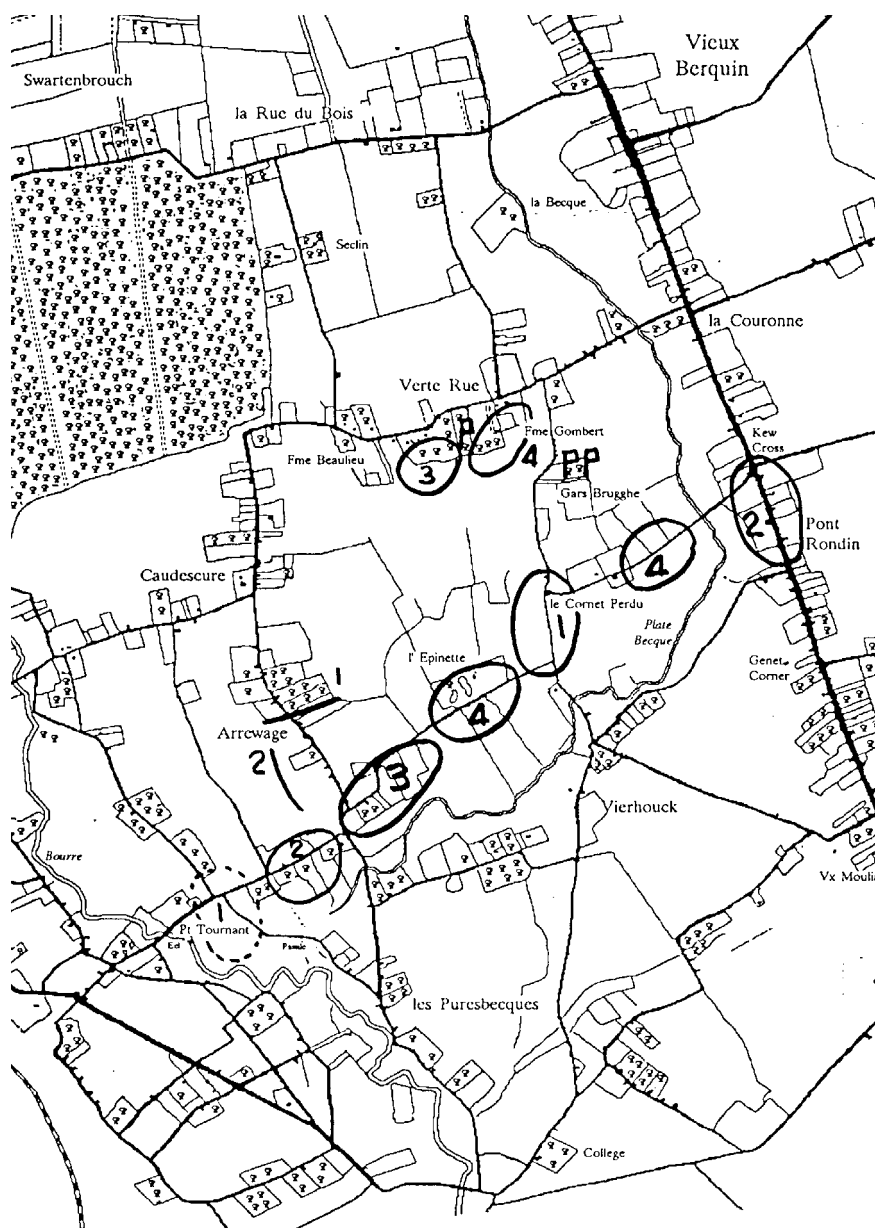


Fig. 5-5 The Position After the Attack

The Coldstream were fortunate to have two companies of the Irish Guards to reinforce the weakened right flank. The right company of the Grenadiers - No. 1 - had tried to

²³ Captain JAC Whitaker, wounded and missing; Lieut. CW Raphael, wounded; 2nd Lieut. AM Carr, missing.

move forward and were now not in their original fire positions, however poor they may have been, but were scattered in isolated groups where the advance had left them. Captain Pryce - No. 2 Company - was forced to give up his gains in Pont Rondin and return to his starting position and as a result of the action the company had lost heavily. In order to join up with the 12th KOYLI at La Couronne, No. 4 Company of the Irish Guards was placed under the control of the Grenadiers and helped to form a line along the Vieux Berquin - Estaires road.

At this time 12th KOYLI, on the left flank, were placed under the command of the 4th Guards Brigade, but this just extended the brigade line, although they did bring with them the remaining two sections of 8 guns of C Company 31st Division Machine-gun Battalion. Unknown to the brigade some of the 150th Brigade were still in position west of Pont Tournant where men had been falling back all morning.

Supported by artillery and trench mortars controlled from the observation balloons the Germans attacked again in afternoon starting at about 3.30 p.m. The first attack was on the brigade right; No. 1 Company Coldstream Guards and some of the 150th Brigade were forced back by the 93rd Regiment and the line gave at about 4.00 p.m. along the road from Pont Tournant to the cross-roads which marked the right of No. 3 Company. As they moved forward the Germans were exposed to fire from the Irish Guards No. 2 Company. With great speed and initiative the commanders of No. 2 Companies Irish and Coldstream Guards, who were in reserve, mounted a counter-attack and the line was restored, but casualties among the Irish Guards were particularly heavy. Thus the advance of the 93rd Regiment was stayed.

During the late afternoon and early evening the weary troops of the 150th Brigade left the field and retired to La Motte. In the general confusion the survivors of No. 1 Company Coldstream Guards, still under Sergeant Vickers, were scattered and lost touch with the battalion. Most accounts have them withdrawing to Pont Tournant where 2nd Lieut. Leadbitter had a Lewis-gun section.²⁴

The German 72nd Regiment attacked the two remaining Coldstream companies (3 and 4) at 4.30 p.m. but made no progress. The defenders must have been helped by the Plate Becque stream, which must have been difficult to cross under fire.

On the brigade left, the Grenadier battalions were attacked by the German 141st Regiment which also had difficulties with the Plate Becque. The Grenadiers were assisted by an 18 pdr battery of 152 Brigade RFA which inflicted many casualties on the

advancing Germans. All accounts pay tribute to the bravery of their Forward Observation Officer at battalion HQ, Lieut. Lewis, who continuously exposed himself to get observation, and his linesmen who repaired the telephone cables in the open under fire. The whole day battalion HQ of the Grenadiers was fired at by two field guns located only about 2000 yards away on the road south of Pont Rondin. This was probably the same battery that was firing at Captain Pryce.

On the left of the line, to the north-east, the Germans attacked the 149th Brigade who continued the front from the KOYLI left. Gradually during the afternoon the KOYLI left was forced to retreat towards the outskirts of Vieux Berquin pivoting on La Couronne.

There was a certain amount of muddle during the night of 12/13th as brigade HQ re-adjusted the line. From a surviving message we know that Brigadier-General Butler proposed a three battalion front, which would have left him 210 Field Company RE and the trench mortar battery as his reserves. Also, the Grenadiers' line was to be adjusted to face south-east rather than south so that it could meet with 12 KOYLI near La Couronne. It was hoped that units of the 5th Division would take over the right of the brigade front, thus increasing the reserves.²⁵ Later, the battalions were informed that the poor situation on the left of the brigade meant that 'any withdrawal should be made so as to face the enemy Eastward rather than SE'²⁶.

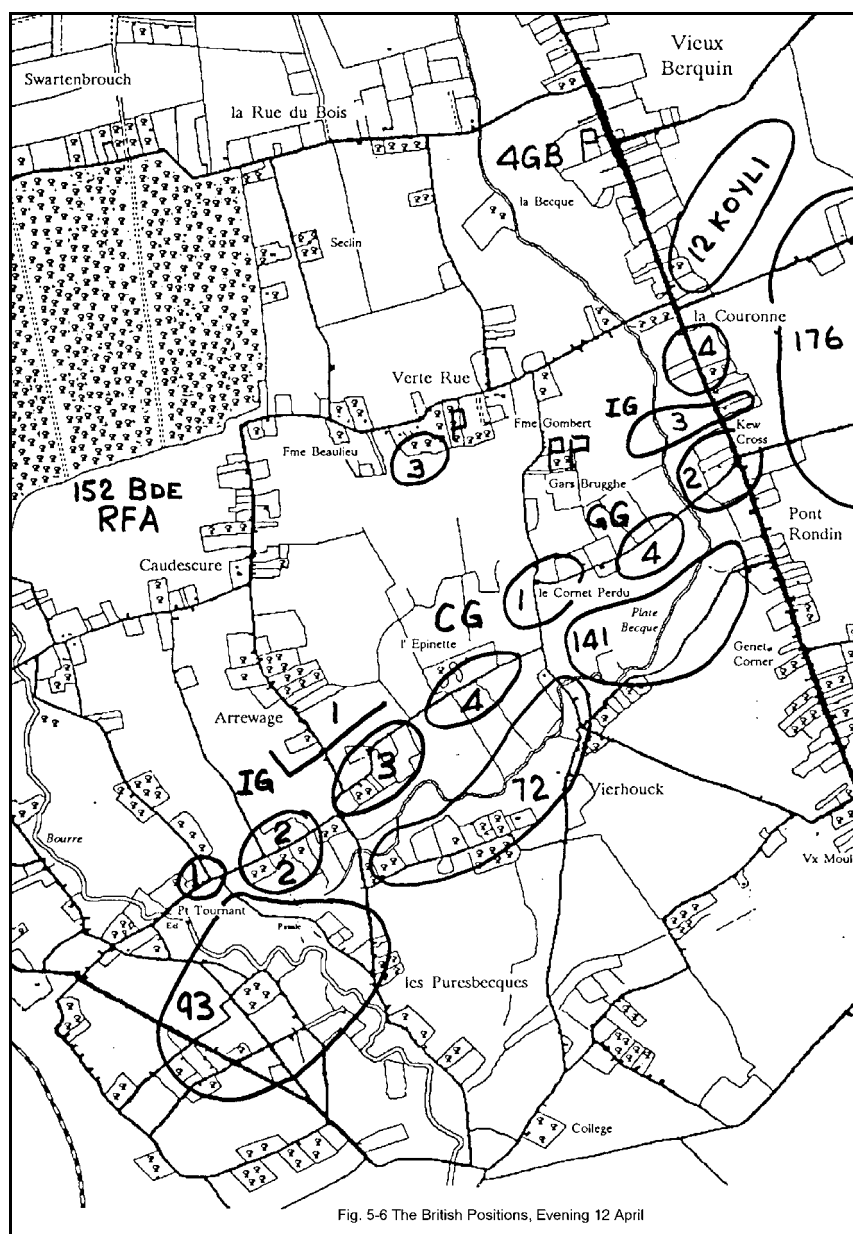
The easiest way to understand the night's movements is to follow each battalion in turn. As the 5th Division arrived, the order for the Irish Guards to occupy the right flank was cancelled, and they were moved to a reserve line just east of the enclosures in Caudescure and Arrewage facing eastwards. While organising this they acquired a company of the 1st Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, from 95th Brigade, who were slotted into the line between No. 2 and 3 Companies of the Irish Guards. From north to south and facing east the reserve line was No. 4 Company, No. 3 Company, DCLI company, No. 2 Company, and facing south-east No. 1 Company. Battalion HQ moved to a house in Caudescure, having sheltered in a farm in Verte Rue after being shelled out of Ferme Gombert. During the night they received ammunition and further shovels, but dawn found them still digging in. As the night was pitch black it is surprising that anyone found their way around.²⁷

²⁴ 2nd Lieut. CO Leadbitter, missing on the 13th

²⁵ The 5th Division left Italy on the 1st April

²⁶ PRO WO 95/1226: Coldstream messages.

²⁷ Aldous, JRT, 'Something of War', *Royal Engineers Journal*, March 1981, p. 41.



The Coldstream were to be responsible for the same front as on the 12th except that their left was extended. Lieut.-Colonel Longueville withdrew No. 2 Company to a line some 3-400 yards in the rear to act as his reserve, while No. 3 Company were to remain in their trenches. On the battalion left he instructed Captain Elwes, commanding No. 4 Company, to extend his left to include Le Cornet Perdu, thus giving the Coldstream a front of almost 2000 yards. Battalion HQ moved in the early evening to Ferme Beaulieu, where it was established by 10 p.m. Lieut.-Colonel Longueville then spent the rest of the night looking for the remains of No. 1 Company. Trappes-Lomax says that Lieut.-Colonel Longueville searched for them during the early hours of the

next day and only found them at dawn.

The Grenadier line was about 1800 yards long. Such were the casualties of the 12th that Lieut.-Colonel Pilcher had to put all his companies up, and even then it was one man for every ten yards of front. To complicate matters the line readjustment was in two stages. A battalion order issued before the brigade order defined a line facing east about La Couronne. Upon receipt of the brigade order, Captain Minchin²⁸ was despatched with new instructions from battalion HQ to the companies, arriving at the front around midnight. He was informed by Captain Pryce that the men were too tired to dig the new line, but after confirming his instructions Captain Minchin prevailed. It must have been a superhuman effort to start digging again after two days and nights without sleep and only the prospect of the next day's fighting, plus the discipline of the Guards Regiments, could have motivated them. Assisted by 210 Field Company RE, they dug a series of pits each holding four or five men, but even so in many places there were wide gaps between them. They were thus able to snatch some sleep while one man kept watch. They also had to contend with the old trench enemy - water - at about three feet. During the night battalion HQ joined the Coldstream at Ferme Beaulieu. The Grenadiers were not so lucky as the other battalions with their supplies; the ammunition for the left three companies was left on the road north of La Couronne at dawn and only Captain Pryce was able to obtain only five boxes. This was to have a decisive effect the next day.

Let us not forget 12th KOYLI who, as mentioned earlier were now part of the brigade.²⁹ The exact location of their line is not recorded but their regimental history states that they were in touch with the Grenadiers on their right and the South Wales Borderers on their left and that a new line was dug during the night. To cover any gap in the line No. 3 Company Irish Guards³⁰ was placed under the command of the Grenadiers and sent to Verte Rue to be ready to counter-attack, although in the event they were used for a very different purpose.

²⁸ Capt. T Minchin DSO, wounded on the 13th.

²⁹ Many accounts mention that 12 KOYLI were given the sobriquet "The Yorkshire Guards" for their efforts on the 13th. This does not seem to have stuck as it is not mentioned in reference works on military nicknames.

³⁰ Lieut. MR Fitzgerald, killed on the 13th.

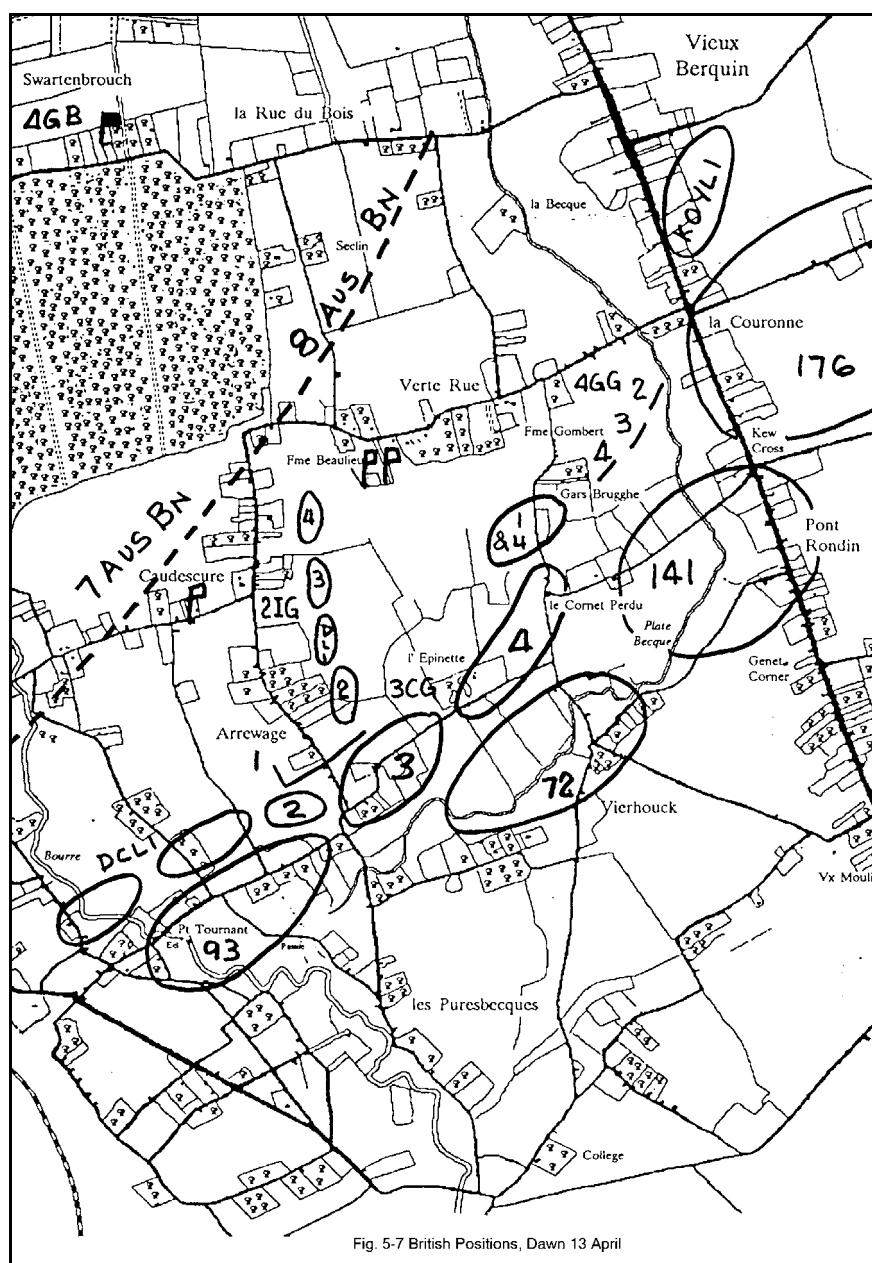


Fig. 5-7 British Positions, Dawn 13 April

The Germans must have been really frustrated by this relatively small group of determined men standing in the path of their advance towards Hazebrouck. The task set the Guards was almost done, as the Australians and the 5th Division were moving into position and elsewhere resistance was stiffening. Thus although the Guards position was weak, the addition of the Australians gave the defence of this part of the front some depth.

In contrast to the 12th, dawn on the 13th found the battlefield shrouded in mist, of which the Germans took full advantage, bringing machine-guns right up to the line. Their first attack was by the 2nd Battalion of the 72nd Regiment against the Coldstream

aided by an armoured car, which three times came up the road from Les Puresbecques to within 10 yards of No. 3 Company's line, and three times was driven back by Lewis-gun and rifle fire. Meanwhile No. 5 Company of the 72nd Regiment attacked the Coldstream's No. 4 Company positions in front of L'EpINETTE calling out in the mist that they were the 'King's Company Grenadiers'.³¹ This was probably the most foolish ruse that they could have tried as every guardsman knows that this company is No. 1 Company Grenadier Guards, at the time serving with the Guards Division. However the Germans prevailed and eventually, after heavy losses, captured L'EpINETTE. Any advantage that the Germans may have gained from their breach of the line was fortunately short lived. The remains of No. 1 Company under Sergeant Vickers, having been located in the early hours by Lieut.-Colonel Longueville and sent to reinforce the garrison at L'EpINETTE, although arriving too late to assist in its defence, were able to halt the German advance in the open ground behind.

The attack spread from the Coldstream's position all along the brigade front. Throughout the morning the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 141st Regiment assisted by machine-guns, trench mortars and light artillery attacked the thinly held line of the Grenadier's No. 3 and No. 4 Companies. Captain Pryce and No. 2 Company were again attacked by troops supported by field guns fired at point blank range.

On the left of the line the attacks on 12 KOYLI commenced at about 8.30 a.m. and four times during the morning the Germans were repulsed. Meanwhile the Australians were moving into position and the Guards task was nearly over.

The situation was still considered critical however as the Brigadier-General sent a message to his battalions stating that: 'If compelled to retire Brigade will take up line SE corner of BOIS D'AVAIL - VERTE RUE - LA COURONNE. Should this be much enfiladed the senior CO must give the necessary orders (but there must be no retirement without orders from Bde. H.Q.) to swing back left and hold line S.E. corner of BOIS D'AVAIL - VIEUX BERQUIN church to point of junction between 12 KOYLI'.³² This shows that brigade was still trying to control the battle from two miles in the rear and allowing the commanders on the spot little chance to make quick decisions if the situation suddenly deteriorated. It was the left of the line that was the problem, the right being anchored on the 5th Division.

The afternoon saw the gradual break-up of the line as continuous German

³¹ PRO WO 95/1226: Coldstream messages.

³² Ibid.

pressure, plus the shortage of men and ammunition, took their toll. On the right of the brigade the Coldstream were repeatedly attacked by the 2nd Battalion of the 72nd Regiment until No. 2 and No. 3 Companies were finally overwhelmed at about 2.30 p.m. The advancing Germans were halted by the reserve line, mainly No. 1 Company of the Irish Guards in their trenches south of Arrewage. There were many deeds of heroism during this last desperate phase of the battle. One Coldstreamer 17800 Private H R Jacotine was in the left post of No. 3 Company which he continued to defend single handed for twenty minutes after the other occupants had become casualties until finally he was killed by a grenade.³³ The redoubtable Sergeant Vickers and some Irish Guards, still positioned behind L'Epinette, were able to hold on until nightfall when they fell back onto the Australian lines.

Number 1 Company of the Grenadiers, together with No. 4 Company of the Coldstream who had fallen back on them during the morning, held on until 4.30 p.m. when they were overwhelmed by the 1st Battalion of the 72nd Regiment. The other three companies of the Grenadiers were proving too much for the 141st Regiment and so the assistance of their right neighbour, the 176th, was called upon. The two centre companies - No. 3 and No. 4 - held on until about 3.00 p.m. when, their ammunition being exhausted, they too were overwhelmed.

During the afternoon forty men from the brigade Trench Mortar Battery armed only with rifles, under Lieut.. AG Pinder, a Coldstream officer, and C Company of 1 DCLI arrived at the battalion HQ of the Irish Guards in Caudescure, and were put into the line to replace Fitzgerald's No. 3 Company which had been sent to Verte Rue in the morning.³⁴

³³ Private Jacotine did not receive an award for his bravery (the rank of guardsman was not created until 22nd November 1918). According to his record, he was born in Ceylon and came to Britain to enlist.

³⁴ Trappes-Lomax states that the mortars were lost on the night of 12/13th and not recovered until the 16th. What little story lies behind this is not recorded.

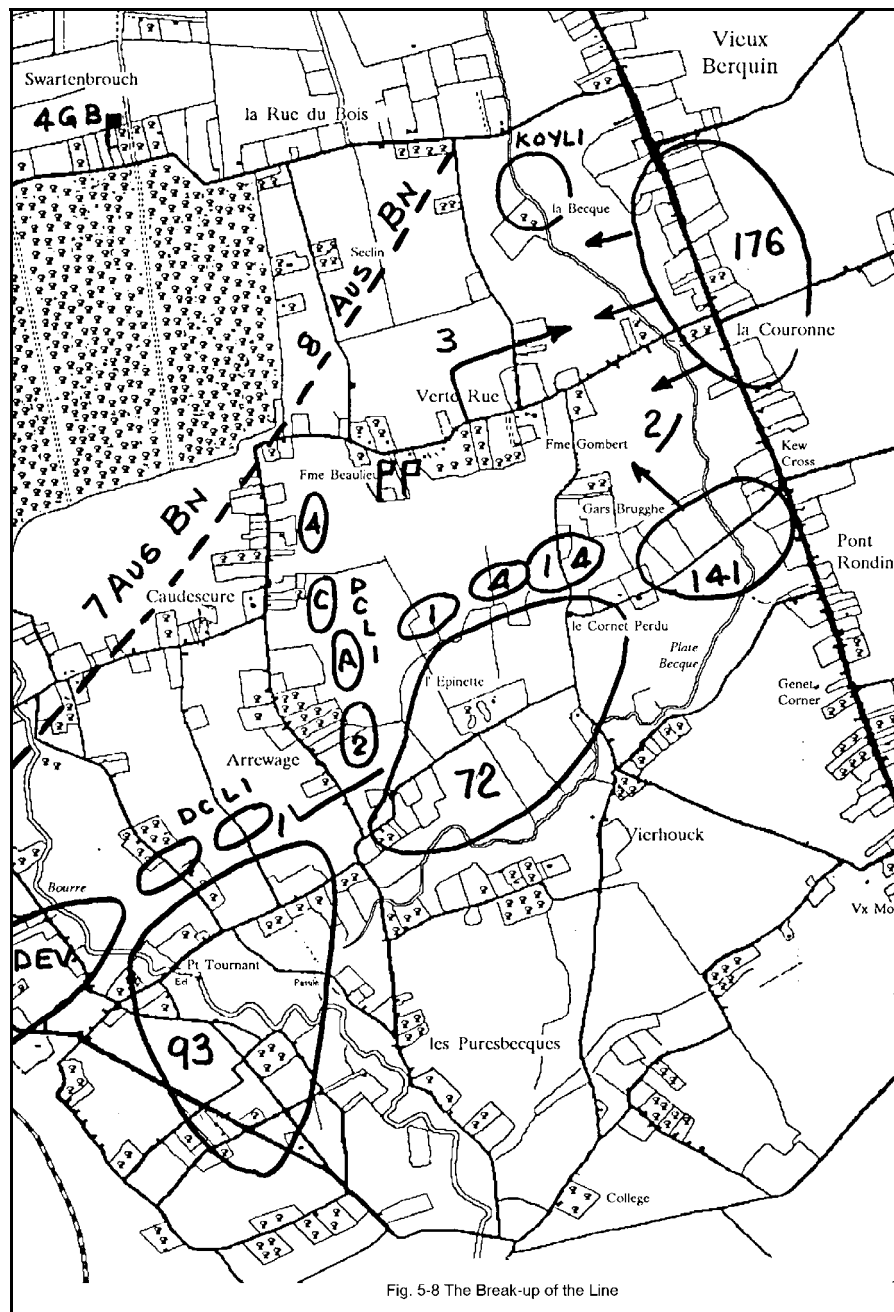


Fig. 5-8 The Break-up of the Line

On the left of the brigade, at 1.30 p.m. 12 KOYLI were bombarded from the trench they had vacated the day before and the line was broken. They fell back and rallied at La Becque farm, but so heavy was the machine-gun fire that they were forced to retreat to the Australian lines on the Rue du Bois, and thus the Germans captured Vieux Berquin. The collapse of the left flank allowed the Germans to penetrate as far as Verte Rue where further eastward movement was stopped by the timely intervention of the battalion HQ staff of the Grenadiers and Coldstream. In the late afternoon the battalion HQ of the Grenadiers and Coldstream moved to Caudescure with the Irish

Guards. As a consequence of this Captain Pryce and the remains of No. 2 Company were surrounded on three sides. Captain Pryce sent his last recorded message, 'My left flank is entirely in the air. The KOYLI have gone.'³⁵ Lieut.-Colonel Pilcher's reply was very much to the point: 'Hold on as long as possible. Shoot Germans advancing. You must hold VERTE RUE - LA COURONNE at all costs.'³⁶

Lieut.-Colonel Alexander who happened to be in the vicinity realised that the only reserve near enough to be of any assistance to the Grenadier's No. 2 Company was his No. 3, who had earlier been despatched to Verte Rue ready to plug any gap in the Coldstream's line. On his own initiative he ordered Lieut. Fitzgerald to form a defensive flank on Pryce's left astride the La Couronne - Verte Rue road. At 3.30 p.m. they moved off but were attacked by the 2nd Battalion of the 176th Regiment coming south after their capture of Vieux Berquin, and caught in the open by machine-guns firing from the cover of houses on the Vieux Berquin - Neuf Berquin road. Although they returned the enemy fire, unable to find cover of any sort, they were all soon casualties, including all the officers.³⁷ Only one NCO and six men rejoined the battalion under cover of darkness.

Of all the descriptions of Captain Pryce's last actions that written by Lieut.-Colonel Ponsonby in the Grenadier Regimental History is by far the best.

By the evening the defenders were practically at the end of their tether. Only eighteen out of the thirty were left, and they had used up every scrap of ammunition. The Germans were in Verte Rue, and the beleaguered band could see the field-grey uniforms advancing towards Bois d'Aval. It was now 8.15. Suddenly Captain Pryce perceived a new move against him. A party of the enemy had made up their minds to test the strength of their obstinate opponents; they pressed forward, and got to within 80 yards of the stubbornly-held trenches. The position seemed hopeless, but not for a moment did he flinch. Though the last cartridge had been fired, the men still had their bayonets, and he ordered them to charge.

Straight at the advancing enemy he rushed at the head of his handful of men. The Germans were completely taken aback. They dared not fire, for fear of hitting their own men, who were now in the rear of the Grenadiers' desperately defended position, and retired. Thereupon Captain Pryce decided to take his men back to the trench again.

But by now the enemy had seen. They had realised the almost incredible weakness of the hitherto unknown force, that had so long successfully kept them at bay. And, restored to confidence, they came on once more. Once more Captain Pryce led the tattered remnant of his company - that

³⁵ Grenadier Guards Archive: Pryce message.

³⁶ Trappes-Lomax, *4th Guards Brigade*, p. 13.

³⁷ Lieut. MR Fitzgerald, killed; Lieut. Lord Settrington, missing; 2nd Lieut. BM Cassidy, killed.

now numbered only fourteen - to the charge, and when last seen they were still fighting fearlessly and doggedly against overwhelming odds.³⁸

Only one man, a corporal, returned to the brigade lines the next night after hiding in Vieux Berquin. Later 14 men were found to be prisoners in Germany.

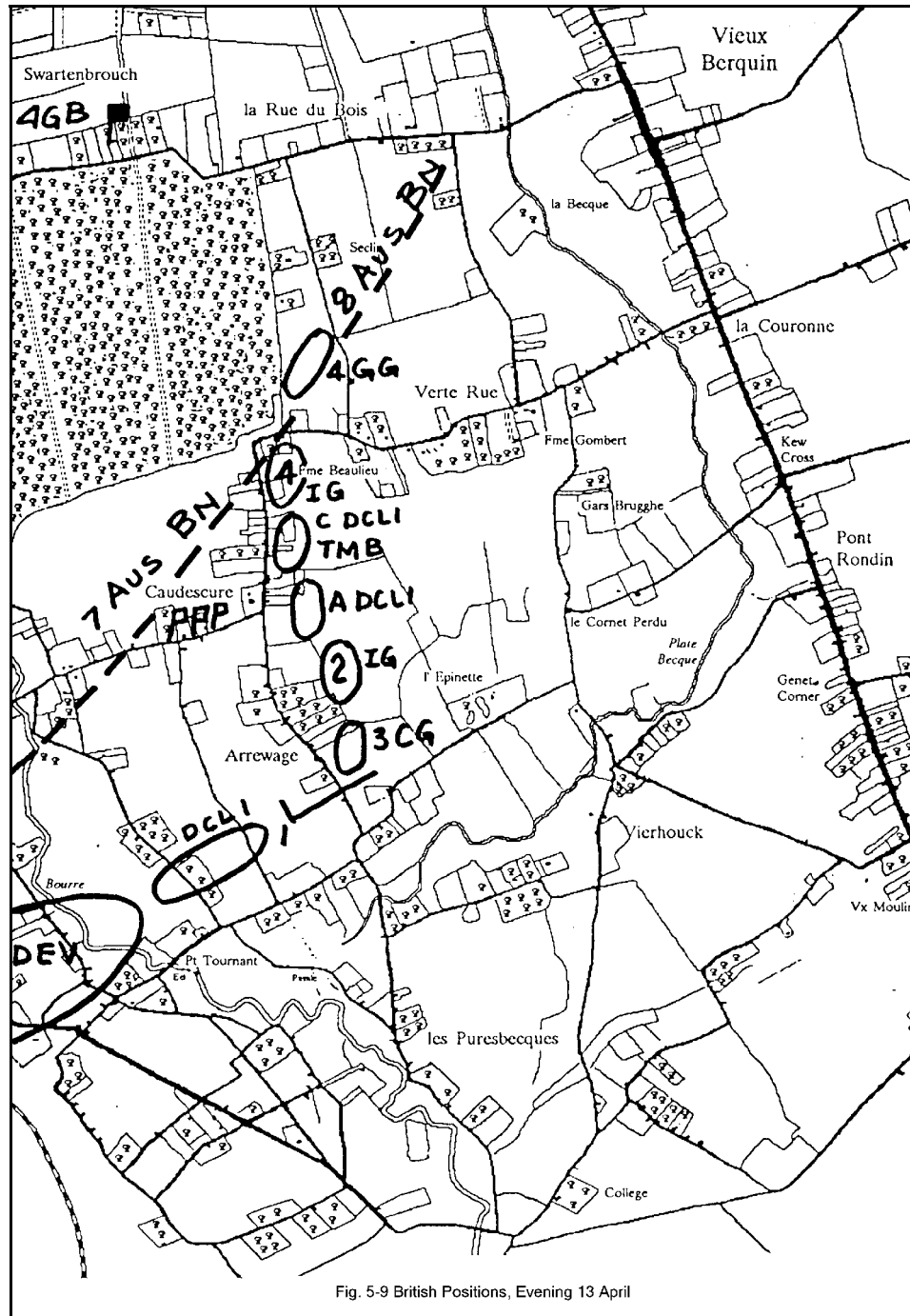


Fig. 5-9 British Positions, Evening 13 April

³⁸ Ponsonby, *Grenadier Guards*, Vol. III, pp. 46-7.

The force of the German advance was now spent, the Guards having bought sufficient time for the Australians to get into their positions. The Guards remained in the line with the Australians during the night of the 13/14th and for the next day. The 14th was quiet compared with the previous two, although there were a few minor skirmishes on the right of the line and at midday an attack developed against the 5th Division on the brigade right preceded by an artillery barrage.

During the evening the brigade was taken out of the line and marched through La Motte to Le Tir Anglais from where they were to be transported to Hazebrouck to help man the defences. The Coldstream were caught by artillery fire during the relief and sustained some casualties. Unfortunately transport was in short supply and some men had to march the whole way to the billets in Borre on the road between Hazebrouck and Strazeele. Such were the casualties that it was necessary to re-organise the brigade, the Coldstream and Grenadiers were combined into a composite battalion under the command of Lieut.-Colonel Pilcher, the Irish Guards were just able to make a weak battalion and the 12 KOYLI were the third battalion in the brigade.

Two statistics give a measure of the ferocity of the action. Firstly, it is reported that the Grenadiers fired 110,000 rounds of ammunition during the two days and the Coldstream almost as much. Secondly, the casualty figures for the brigade are well recorded although there are some small variations between the sources have used the figures given by Trappes-Lomax.

		Total Involved	Killed	Wounded	POW	Total Casualties
4 Grenadier Guards	O OR	20 550	6 126	5 125	6 238	17 489
3 Coldstream Guards	O OR	16 510	1 171	4 142	7 136	12 449
2 Irish Guards	O OR	19 450	5 63	4 165	1 22	10 250
12 KOYLI	O OR	19 510	2 51	7 154	2 57	11 262
Totals	O OR	74 2020	14 411	20 586	16 453	50 1450

The POW figures include the wounded prisoners. Many of those killed have no known grave. Some are commemorated on the Ploegsteert Memorial over the border in Belgium. Even allowing for the officers and men left out, the battalions could only have

been two companies in strength.

The highest tributes were paid to the brigade. Lieut.-General De Lisle sent the following message:

The record of the glorious stand against overwhelming odds made by the 4th Guards Brigade is of exceptional interest. The History of the British Army can record nothing finer than the action of the 4th Guards Brigade on the 12th and 13th April.³⁹

If the words of Senior Officers sound hollow, the following from an Australian - Lieut. Kerr of the 8th Australian Battalion - would not have been given lightly:

The men of my company and battalion are full of admiration for the way in which the Guards fought. The moral effect on our troops by their resistance was excellent.⁴⁰

We tend to forget those waiting at home for news,⁴¹ the Regimental Lieut.-Colonel of the Grenadier Guards, Lieut.-Colonel Henry Streatfeild, wrote to Lieut.-Colonel Pilcher thanking him for his report of the battle and after giving news of those officers who were reported prisoners, he added 'I earnestly hope that Pryce may still be alive to receive some recognition of his extraordinary bravery and skilled leadership. Your description of the way he led his company is very fine. If any man ever deserved a VC he does.'⁴²

On the 19 April the 4th Guards Brigade was again in the line when the 31st Division relieved the 2nd Australian Brigade (1st Australian Division) somewhere between Caudescure and Strazeele. Brig.-General Butler was gassed on the 24th during a bombardment of the Bois d'Aval and Lieut.-Colonel Alexander temporarily took command until his return on the 7 May.

The brigade left the 31st Division on the 20 May, without 12 KOYLI, drafts having arrived from England allowing the Coldstream and Grenadiers to regain their separate identities. After a period of digging defences they moved to billets at Criel Plage between Treport and Dieppe. Even so they were a spent force and became part of the GHQ reserve. In September 1918 they were formed into a motorised column as part of the Cavalry Corps, but were never used. At the Armistice they rejoined the Guards Division at Maubeuge, from where the BEF had started in 1914. The shattered village of Vieux Berquin was recaptured on the 13 August and gradually the inhabitants

³⁹ Ross-of-Bladensberg, *The Coldstream Guards*, Vol. II, p. 252.

⁴⁰ Trappes-Lomax, *4th Guards Brigade*, p. 17.

⁴¹ Including the author's grandmother

⁴² Letter in the possession of Mr. J. Pilcher. Pryce's VC was gazetted on 12 May 1918 and is now on display at the Grenadier Guards Regimental Headquarters.

returned and rebuilt their homes and their lives.

There were many actions similar to this during the March and April battles and any could be used to examine how prepared the BEF was. By choosing the Guards we have units that consider themselves the best and have an ethos of excellence.

Lieut.-Colonel Pilcher added a section 'Some lessons to be learned' to his after battle report.⁴³ He was certainly aware that there was some room for improvement in his battalion's performance, commenting that there was an 'urgent necessity in training the men in open warfare'. He was also conscious of his lack of firepower; besides the lack of artillery support, he was keen to take the fight to the enemy by pushing up snipers and Lewis guns together with forward field guns to take on the German artillery. He points out that a trench mortar battery 'would have been useful'; and also rifle grenades. At a more mundane level he suggested that 70% of the men should carry shovels, the Coldstream certainly suffered from a lack of these as a message was sent by the OC No. 3 Company asking for some early on the 13th.⁴⁴ The problem with this type of report is that the commander is unlikely to admit to his own, or others', mistakes.

However, in staff rides between the wars there was some criticism of the conduct of the battle. Staff rides were training exercises for subalterns, often conducted on the Great War battlefields; of course these were undertaken with the benefit of hindsight and daylight. There is evidence of much discussion of the position taken up by the brigade and the lack of depth to the line was pointed out.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, such is the topography that there is no obvious line to be defended, although the Verte Rue, being nearer the forest would have given easier communication. All were agreed that brigade headquarters was too far back, while the battalion headquarters were too far forward, almost in the front line. Also, the brigade formed the line with too little information, i.e. no reconnaissance. It was suggested that the brigade should have been held in a position of readiness until dawn and then moved forward. This would have allowed for a hot meal as the future was uncertain. In fact, the transport was moved separately and the brigade had to rely on the charity of a French baker when it arrived at Strazeele. All were agreed that the forward movement on the 11th was a waste of men and the

⁴³ PRO WO 95/1226: 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards, Staff ride document.

⁴⁴ PRO WO 95/1226: Coldstream messages.

⁴⁵ PRO WO 95/1226: 4th Battalion Grenadier Guards, Staff ride document

brigadier should have refused the order from division as he was under superior orders. This muddle shows that the brigade was not used to open warfare.

The surviving field messages give some insight into how the command of the battle operated. Brigade took no tactical part in the battle. All their messages gave information on troops arriving in the area, and situation reports on other brigades in the line. In fact, when Butler wanted to give a tactical order, he had to go and see for himself what was happening. Many messages have time sent and received on them which show it often took over an hour to cover a few hundred yards, if they ever arrived at all. This type of command stifles initiative, but there are some examples of officers and men acting on their own. The decision by Lieut.-Colonel Alexander to move his No. 3 Company to Pryce's aid and Sergeant Vickers⁴⁶ leading the remains of his company are just two examples.

Other units also found open warfare difficult. After a forty-two mile march the 31st Division signals unit arrived on the battlefield.⁴⁷ They immediately set about establishing sounder and telephone communication from division to brigades via cables and airlines. Wireless sets, when available, were issued to brigades, who were also responsible for the telephone links within their command. These links were continuously broken by shellfire and it was not until the 13th that 'communications were established between the Artillery Brigades and the Infantry Brigades they were covering'.⁴⁸ Thus this communications network was unreliable, and so, field messages had to be used.

The lesson that the BEF had to learn from the battles was to allow subordinate commanders, the men on the spot, to make decisions. Orders which required the sanction of a commander before they could be carried out; or the one from De Lisle that 'no retirement should be made or the line re-adjusted, except by order of a responsible officer prepared to justify his decision before a court-martial' were counter-productive. Perhaps initiative is fine so long as it is successful.

⁴⁶ He was awarded a bar to the DCM he had won three weeks before.

⁴⁷ PRO WO 95/2352: 31st Division Signals, War Diary, 13 April 1918.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 6

THE BATTLE FOR THE RESERVES

The arrival of the French divisions during the battles for the Flanders hills was not the result of an existing plan; rather, it was the outcome of a political campaign fought by Haig and GHQ during late March and April 1918. In general, GHQ took little part in the higher direction of battles; that was the job of army and corps commanders. The staff at Montreuil kept the lines of communications working, supplying men and material to the battlefield; in the spring of 1918 the BEF had ample guns and ammunition, it was men they were short of. The immediate requirement was for divisions that could be moved up in support of, or take over from, the tired ones in the front line. The only source of such formations was the French Army; but the French were loathe to give up any reserves as they expected to be attacked themselves. What was missing was a co-ordinated Allied military effort that would allow for mutual assistance in times like these. The March attack was the catalyst that gave the Allies military unity and the Lys was its first test.

It is surprising that the Allies had got through over three years of coalition war with very little formal co-ordination of their efforts. The two original corps of the BEF had been considered part of the French effort, if only because of the difference in size of the forces involved. In 1915 the British held about one-fifth of the line and gradually extended their line southwards during 1916. When Haig took over the command of the BEF in late 1915, Kitchener informed him that ‘your command is an independent one, and that you will in no case come under the order of any Allied General’.⁴⁹ However, Haig ‘acted on General Joffre’s “General Instructions” as if they had been Orders, but retained absolute freedom of action as to how I carried them out.’⁵⁰ In practice this meant that the two commanders-in-chief had to form a working relationship.

At the end of 1916 there were changes at the top in both camps: Lloyd George

⁴⁹ Blake, *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p. 121.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

replaced Asquith as Prime Minister, while Nivelle replaced Joffre as the French commander-in-chief. Lloyd George was not convinced that the war could be won on the Western Front, where the price in casualties was becoming too high. He favoured the so-called 'Easterner' solution of knocking out the Turks and Austrians, while holding the Germans in France and Flanders. Coupled with this Lloyd George had little faith in his military advisors, and would dearly have liked to rid himself of Haig, and the CIGS General Sir William Robertson. Lloyd George's problem was that while his political position was weak Haig and the 'army faction' had a lot of support both inside and outside the Government. To make matters worse the dislike was reciprocated.

Lloyd George tried both the direct and indirect approach to curb the powers of Robertson and Haig, while at the same time obtaining a unified command. On 26 and 27 February 1917, a conference was held at Calais ostensibly to discuss the preparations for the 1917 campaigns. Lloyd George with the connivance of the French proposed to place Haig under the command of the French commander-in-chief, General Nivelle. In the event neither Lloyd George nor the French would face up to Haig and Robertson; Lloyd George went to bed claiming he was ill and the French generals blamed their politicians. In October 1917 Lloyd George had another try at the Rapallo conference, suggesting to the French the establishment of a body to study the war as a whole and make plans for its prosecution having regard for every front. This led to the decision to form what was to be known as the Supreme War Council (SWC). The French proposed Foch as their representative, but Lloyd George, looking to the SWC as a way of curbing Robertson's power, objected. In the end General Sir Henry Wilson, was appointed to represent Britain.

The appointment of Wilson was another reason why there would be no support for the new organisation from the British Army. Wilson was not liked by his peers; besides being 'the ugliest man in the army'⁵¹ his love of intrigue made him unpopular. Every large organisation seems to breed a Henry Wilson, with often only mediocre ability but a master politician, in the right place at the right time and able to cultivate the decision makers. Wilson had become a favourite of Lloyd George's, due to his support for the latter's policies and his ability to explain complex military problems to the layman. Henry Wilson is often portrayed as a buffoon, especially when compared with his rather dour contemporaries. In addition to his habit of giving nick-names to his associates, his diaries are full of flippant remarks. For example, when describing his

journey to Doullens with Lord Milner on 26 March he comments: 'A certain amount of natives on the move'.⁵² However, Lloyd George was not a fool; he probably saw Wilson for what he was and was not taken in by the glibness, but used him in his fight with the army.

The CIGS was the military advisor of the Government, and so now it had two. To Robertson this dilution of his authority was almost the final straw but he refused to resign. However, Robertson decided that he had had enough, and resigned on 9 February 1918, Wilson becoming CIGS.⁵³ Wilson's place on the SWC was taken by the Fourth Army commander, General Sir Henry Rawlinson,⁵⁴ a forceful character, and the two were soon in conflict over the formation of a General Reserve. Rawlinson's move in March to take over Gough's army command, when the latter was sacked, enabled Wilson to put in his 'own man', Major-General Sackville-West.⁵⁵

The dismissal of Haig proved to be too difficult; as well as having powerful friends, including the king, Haig personified the BEF and his name was a household word. Besides, there was no obvious successor. Under the cover of inspecting the BEF's defences Lloyd George sent General Smuts and Sir Maurice Hankey to France in January in an abortive attempt to look for a replacement. Thus, for the want of an acceptable successor, Haig's position was secure.

The SWC was a step in the right direction, there being no disagreement about the need for such a body. It was, however, formed for the wrong reason: 'in setting up the Council, the real object of ministers was not so much to provide effective unity of military command as to acquire for themselves a greater control over the military chiefs.'⁵⁶ Setting up such a body implied the creation of an Allied commander-in-chief or generalissimo at some stage, to which both politicians and generals were opposed. What may have been at the back of everyone's mind was the fact that if the BEF came under orders of GQG or a French generalissimo, then Britain might be considered a junior partner in the coalition; which would have repercussions when it came to divide the victors' spoils.

The SWC's proposal to form a Strategic Reserve floundered on the question of

⁵¹ His own description of himself.

⁵² IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 26 March 1918.

⁵³ Ironically, Robertson went to Eastern Command, the appointment Wilson gave up to become British Military Representative on the SWC

⁵⁴ At this time the Fourth Army staff were responsible for the Ypres Salient, Plumer having gone to Italy to restore the situation there.

⁵⁵ Known for some reason by the sobriquet 'Tit Willow'. The Wilson diaries are full of these nick-names.

command and opposition from Haig and Pétain.⁵⁷ The idea took shape at the beginning of 1918 as a method of countering the expected German offensive. On 25 January 'the permanent military representatives approved joint note 14, which urged the creation of an Allied manoeuvre force for the French and Italian fronts.'⁵⁸ The difficulty was, who should command it, the SWC or the commanders-in-chief? As a compromise, and probably a means of enhancing his own position, Wilson suggested to Lloyd George that the Permanent Military Representatives⁵⁹ form an Executive War Board, with Foch as chairman, to control the reserves.⁶⁰ Thus Foch moved a step further towards becoming supreme commander. Unfortunately, for the moment, his was destined to be an empty command, neither Haig nor Pétain handed over a single soldier to his reserve. To be fair to Haig, he had few to offer; five of his divisions had been moved to Italy in December which left him only six in GHQ reserve.⁶¹ Pétain also claimed he had no divisions to offer, adding 'that a committee could not run a battle, and that he could not upset all the plans he had already made with Haig.'⁶²

Haig and Pétain had made their own arrangements for co-operation between the French and British Armies in the event of a German attack. This went further than a 'handshake' between the two commanders-in-chief. French and British staffs commanded by General Humbert (French Third Army) and Lieut.-General Hamilton Gordon (IX Corps) were charged with working out zones for the concentration of troops behind each front together with methods of supply. Unfortunately the two formations detailed to carry out these preparations were 'without troops'.⁶³ Thus in the event of an attack they would have to acquire the necessary forces from their superiors. From their experience of the previous years, they probably thought they had plenty of time to firm up these reserves behind their neighbour's front. By their lukewarm support for the SWC and especially the Strategic Reserve, Haig and Pétain forced themselves into this dangerous corner. While the mechanics of mutual assistance could be worked out, the circumstances under which they could be used had, by necessity, to be vague, as they depended on what action the Germans took. What would happen if both armies were attacked simultaneously, or the other was expecting to be attacked? In addition, both

⁵⁶ Robertson, Sir W, *From Private to Field-Marshal* (London: Constable, 1921), Vol. II, p. 329.

⁵⁷ Also known as the General Reserve or Inter-Allied Reserve.

⁵⁸ Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, p. 257.

⁵⁹ Himself, Weygand (France), Cadorna (Italy) and Bliss (USA).

⁶⁰ Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, p. 259.

⁶¹ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 26. The French sent 6 divisions.

⁶² Griffiths, R, *Marshal Pétain* (London: Constable, 1994), p. 57.

commanders were servants of their respective governments and might be called upon to provide troops for some venture away from the Western Front.

As we have seen in Chapter 3 all these preparations came to nought when put to the test. On 24 March Haig met Pétain at Dury, where he learned that the French were reluctant to release divisions to assist the British, believing they too were about to be attacked in Champagne, which shows how effective the German deceptions were. In addition, Pétain, who was under orders to cover Paris at all costs, was willing to lose contact with the BEF if the Germans continued to press their attack, and even move the reserves forming up near Montdidier to the south-west. Haig realised that he needed assistance and hurried back to GHQ in order to summon his superiors to France, 'to arrange that General Foch or some other determined general, who would fight, should be given supreme control of the operations in France'.⁶⁴ Haig was perhaps remembering Foch's appointment in November 1914 to co-ordinate Belgian, British and French forces on the left wing of the Allied front. This was a great leap forward, for the only way to save the situation was overall command of the Allied forces by one man and he had to be French, since they had the reserves and the war was being fought on their territory. In fact, on the same day, Lord Milner was on his way to Versailles and Paris, having been sent by Lloyd George to review the situation. The new CIGS, Sir Henry Wilson, was hot on his heels after a telephone discussion with Foch during which it was agreed that 'someone must catch hold, or we shall be beaten'.⁶⁵ In fact, Wilson left for France before Haig's message reached him.

The wording of Haig's diary gives the impression that the whole idea of Foch taking command of the Allied armies was his; however, Henry Wilson also claims some credit. The two met at GHQ the next day to discuss what should be done. According to Wilson, Haig would have preferred Pétain in overall command, but in the end agreed that Foch should have the post. Meanwhile, Milner had had an indecisive day with the French; also, due to messages going astray, neither party had been able to get together, but a conference was to be held at Dury the next day. On learning this when Wilson and Milner met at Versailles later that evening, Wilson then visited Foch at his home where it was decided that 'at our meeting at Dury tomorrow I would suggest that he (Foch) should be commissioned by both governments to co-ordinate the military action of the

⁶³ Official History, 1918, Vol I, p. 101.

⁶⁴ Blake, *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p. 297.

⁶⁵ IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 24 March 1918.

two C in Cs'.⁶⁶ The meeting with his good friend Foch was Wilson's contribution to the appointment of Foch as generalissimo, political manoeuvring at its best! Although, according to Foch, Wilson wanted Clemenceau to be the co-ordinator with Foch as technical advisor. Foch pointed out that what he wanted was to 'get the British and French to work more closely together'.⁶⁷

On 26 March the British delegation and the French political and military leaders were to have met at Dury, but the venue was changed to Doullens, as Haig had arranged to meet with his army commanders there in the morning. Those present were: for the French, President Poincaré, Clemenceau, Loucheur,⁶⁸ Foch, Pétain and Weygand; for the British, Lord Milner, Wilson, Haig, his chief-of-staff Lawrence, and Major-General Montgomery representing General Rawlinson. Poincaré, as chairman, asked Haig for a report of the British situation followed by a similar request to Pétain. The decisive moment had now arrived and the meeting broke up into a number of small groups. The outcome of these discussions was a proposal drafted by Clemenceau that Foch should be charged with 'the co-ordination of the action of the British and French Armies in front of Amiens'. Thus Foch got some of what he wanted. Haig realised that this tentative first step did not go far enough, and that Foch would be subordinate to himself and Pétain, while what he wanted was for Foch to control Pétain so that the French reserves would be released. In this he was quite correct; it is difficult to see what Foch could have done that was not already being performed by the commanders-in-chief, army and corps commanders. The French troops and especially the reserves would still have been under the command of Pétain. Thus Haig took the next step and proposed that Foch should '*co-ordinate the action of all Allied Armies on the Western front*'.⁶⁹ This document was then signed by Clemenceau and Milner, the latter being in a difficult position as he did not really have the authority for such an action, although he was the British political representative on the SWC. Regardless of whose idea it was, and who said what, the Allies now had the beginnings of a unified command. Wilson and Milner then left for home.

Having got his way, Foch found that he had been placed in an anomalous position. Co-ordination does not necessarily imply authority. All he could do was to 'flit from one headquarters to another' to suggest and persuade, rather than direct, which was

⁶⁶ IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 25 March 1918

⁶⁷ Foch, F, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, tr. Bentley Mott, T (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 297.

⁶⁸ French Minister of Armaments

⁶⁹ Blake *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p. 298 for both quotations, Haig's italics.

what was needed.⁷⁰ To someone of Foch's dynamic nature this must have been very frustrating, so this anomaly was the subject of correspondence between Foch and Clemenceau.⁷¹

To clarify the situation Clemenceau called a further conference, which met in the Marie at Beauvais on 3 April. The British war Cabinet were against the final step - the appointment of Foch to the Supreme Command. However, the final decision was left to Lloyd George's discretion.⁷² The Beauvais Conference was a much grander affair than Doullens; those present were: for the French, Clemenceau, Foch and Pétain; for the British, Lloyd George, Haig, Wilson and Brigadier-General Spears, the Head of the British Military Mission in Paris; for the Americans, Generals Pershing and Bliss.

According to Lloyd George, he had a discussion with Clemenceau before the meeting, when it was decided that 'Foch should be endowed with greater and more direct authority over the Allied forces'.⁷³ These preliminary discussions were a feature of inter-Allied conferences,⁷⁴ with Wilson wavering and Haig opposed, the outcome was uncertain. So Lloyd George took command and when the full conference met at 3 p.m. Foch's instructions were amended to:

the strategic direction of military operations. The Commanders-in-Chief of the British, French and American Armies will have full control of the tactical action of their respective Armies. Each Commander-in-Chief will have the right of appeal to his government if, in his opinion, his Army is endangered by any order received from General Foch.⁷⁵

Wilson claims that the last sentence was added by him as an escape clause. The conference was also used by Haig as an opportunity to push for a French offensive, to relieve the pressure on the BEF; Foch and Pétain 'both stated their determination to start attacking "as soon as possible"',⁷⁶ although they could hardly say otherwise considering the assembled company. Haig doubted whether anything would come of these fine words, continuing in his diary: 'But will they ever attack. I doubt whether the French Army, as a whole, is now fit for an offensive'. Thus we see that once the first step was taken the others followed easily. It took the Allies' darkest hour since 1914 to bring about this unified command. It is interesting that, when the backs were to the wall, all constitutional and procedural arguments that had been raised in the previous year

⁷⁰ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, Vol V, p. 2892.

⁷¹ Foch, *Memoirs*, pp. 313-4.

⁷² Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, Vol. V, p. 2917.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 2918.

⁷⁴ See Blake, *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p. 199 for instance.

⁷⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol II, p. 115.

disappeared.

The Belgians and Italians were left out of the agreement, although the Italians were represented on the SWC. In both cases there were constitutional difficulties owing to 'the fact that in each case the King was the head of the fighting forces'.⁷⁷ On 17 April Foch and Clemenceau visited Belgian GHQ and suggested that the Belgian Army should become part of Foch's command. The king refused, even though his ministers tried to prove that his command was titular only and that the chief of the army staff was responsible for operations.⁷⁸ This was not formally sorted out until almost the end of the war; meanwhile, Foch worked through the Belgian chief-of-staff, General Gillain.

If Lloyd George thought that this new organisation had Haig boxed in he was wrong. It might be argued that Haig's position was stronger after the Beauvais Conference. He was now responsible to a man who would act as a buffer between himself and the politicians. Any argument between Foch and Lloyd George would be bound to involve that other fire eater, Clemenceau.

Haig's diary gives no indication how he felt during these trying days, but the strain on him must have been enormous. His army was being destroyed, and there was no sign of any reinforcements from the French. If things continued as they were, the BEF would be forced to form a box around the Channel ports, or retreat towards the south, and following this the Germans might easily win. We get some clues from Wilson's diary. When he met Haig at GHQ on 25 March he found him 'cowed. He said that unless the whole French Army came up, we were beaten and it would be better to make peace on any terms we could...'.⁷⁹ After the conference at Doullens the next day Haig had recovered his spirits; when Wilson met him in the evening 'just going for a ride and he told me he was greatly pleased with our new arrangements'.⁸⁰ Again, on 9 April Wilson found Haig 'tired - no drive - almost a beaten man - speaks of peace to get him out of his difficulties'.⁸¹ This was rather rich from a man who was unable to make a decision, and been a failure as a corps commander; but, it does give some idea of the strain Haig was under. Haig certainly received support from his religion. On 16 April he wrote to the Church of Scotland chaplain at GHQ, the Rev. George Duncan; 'I am very grateful for your thinking of me at this time, and I know I am sustained in my

⁷⁶ Blake, *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p. 300.

⁷⁷ Hankey, *The Supreme Command*, Vol. II, p. 797.

⁷⁸ Overstraeten, R. van (ed.), *The War Diaries of Albert I* (London: Kimber, 1954), p. 209.

⁷⁹ IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 25 March 1918.

⁸⁰ IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 26 March 1918.

efforts by that Great Unseen Power, otherwise I c'd not be standing the strain as I am doing'.⁸²

The Battles of the Lys was the first test of these new arrangements, and Foch would immediately experience the difficulty of serving two masters, the Allied forces and the French Government.⁸³ At the beginning of April evidence was mounting that the next German attack would be against the British in Flanders. However, Foch was concentrating his efforts on securing Amiens, and making ready for a counter-offensive by British and French Armies on the Somme. Also, the position around Amiens was delicately poised, since to keep the Allies guessing, the Germans had deliberately not dug in, and thus still threatened Paris. On the 6 April, Haig sent his Director of Operations, Major-General Davidson, to Foch's Headquarters at Beauvais with three suggestions for French assistance. These were an offensive, the relief of British divisions in the line, or the placing of French reserves west of Vimy ridge.⁸⁴ As nothing was settled from Davidson's mission, Haig wrote to Foch the same evening pressing him to accept one of the three proposals, also asking for a meeting on the 7 April, presumably so that he could press his case.

They duly met at Aumale but with no success for Haig, as Foch was still concentrating on Amiens and his proposed offensive. However, this did not take place as both commanders, Rawlinson and Pétain, felt they had insufficient forces to carry it out. Haig had guessed what the result of this conference would be, and had telegraphed Wilson asking him to use his influence with Foch, which he did by sending a telegram reiterating Haig's views. After his failure to persuade Foch, Haig asked Wilson to come to France to press the point in person. It is interesting to note that for all his distrust of Wilson, Haig was able to have a professional relationship with him, even to the extent of allowing Wilson the opportunity to succeed where he had failed.

Foch did not create a large staff to go with his position, for had he tried to usurp the powers of GHQ and GQG, the appeals procedure might have been brought into action immediately as this would have been a threat to the positions of Haig and Pétain. Instead, he relied on a small group of officers led by the trusted Weygand, who was

⁸¹ IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 9 April 1918.

⁸² Guy AJ, Thomas RNW and DeGroot GJ (eds.), *Military Miscellany* (Stroud: Sutton for the Army Records Society, 1996), p. 403.

⁸³ Foch was still the French chief-of staff.

⁸⁴ Official History, Vol. II, p. 141.

moved from the Supreme War Council back to being Foch's chief-of-staff. There were also practical reasons for Foch not creating a staff: Much of GHQ work was involved with the quartermaster's function and these would have had to remain separate. Also, Foch would have become bogged down in the detail, and thus unable to perform the function for which he was appointed. There was also the question of a British liaison officer at Foch's headquarters. Wilson suggested Lieut.-General Du Cane to Haig and Foch on 6 April, an idea that was initially rebuffed by Foch.⁸⁵ But, on the 9th he relented, and Du Cane was moved from XV Corps to take up the position on the 12 April, being replaced by Lieut.-General De Lisle. Why Du Cane was chosen remains a mystery. By his own admission: 'I was amused that nobody took the trouble to ask me if I talked French'.⁸⁶ It may just be that he was loyal to Haig and knew how GHQ worked.

When it became obvious that an attack against the British First Army was imminent, Haig appealed again to Foch for troops, suggesting the French take over part of the line in the Ypres sector to enable the BEF to form a reserve behind the front. Foch's reply was to send Weygand to explain that none could be sent. However, on the 9 April when the German offensive became a reality, Foch was visiting Haig at GHQ. Haig explained his view that the Germans were trying to destroy his army and Foch began to thaw; while refusing to take over any part of the British front, he did offer to place four French divisions behind Amiens ready to move north if required. Even after it was explained that this move would block the lines of communication of the Fourth Army, Foch remained adamant, explaining that he wanted to keep the French reserves intact ready to meet any emergency, believing that this attack in the north was a feint to draw French reserves away from protecting Paris.

There then followed an exchange of notes. On the 10th, Haig reminded Foch of the situation and asked him to 'relieve part of the British front and take an active part in the battle'.⁸⁷ Foch had already written to Haig asking to be kept informed about any orders he gave to the First and Second Armies, and what troops were available to reinforce them. Perhaps rather unnecessarily he instructed Haig not to give ground voluntarily as it might be interpreted by the Germans as a sign of weakness. At last Foch became willing to see the British point of view. Late in the evening of the 10th, accompanied by Weygand, he went to see Haig and admitted that the main German

⁸⁵ IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 6 April 1918.

⁸⁶ Du Cane, J, *Marshal Foch*, (Privately printed, 1920), p. 83.

⁸⁷ Official History, Vol II, p. 215.

thrust was against the British. However, he still believed that the danger lay between the Somme and Arras. In fact Foch considered that there were two battles, and saw his priority to be to stabilise the southern front and so reduce the German threat to Paris.

On the 11th Haig sent yet another note to Foch, this time by Major-General Davidson, in which he again pointed out the lack of British reserves, and asked for four French divisions to be placed behind the British on a line, St Omer - Dunkirk. Again, Foch's reply was a statement of the obvious: the British were to 'check the enemy with troops already fighting' and he followed this with advice on the line to be held.⁸⁸ This was a ring around the existing front, to which 'reinforcements must be sent';⁸⁹ if the BEF had had men they would not have been in this situation. However, perhaps as a sop, he did propose that the French II Cavalry Corps due at Hesdin the next day should continue to Cassel to assist the British Second Army. Two infantry divisions were also on the way by rail, 133rd from Paix and 28th from Belfort, to a concentration point south of Dunkirk. This force was to form a line behind the Second Army.

The 11 - 14 April were perhaps the worst days for the British. The Germans continued to press forward against a diminishing BEF and as each day passed the position of the Channel Ports looked more precarious. In order to protect their communications with Britain GHQ began to consider inundations in the Ports' hinterland behind which a new defensive line could be formed. The line suggested by Foch in his note of the 11th was now in preparation by GHQ. The Germans were to be held at all costs on this line.

On the 12th Haig also instructed the British Cavalry Corps to be moved up to Aire to join the French II Cavalry Corps and 133rd Division. In this way he created a mobile force to counter any German breakthrough down the Lys valley or towards Hazebrouck. Some urgency seems to have been put into the French as on the 12th the French cavalry covered 70 miles in one day. These troops, commanded by General Robillot, were placed under the instructions of General Plumer who had taken command of most of the battle front, when the Second Army line was extended south of the Nieppe forest. The same day, Haig met Clemenceau who had visited the Bruay mines, the major source of coal for the French. Haig took this opportunity of pressing his case, explaining the British situation and asking that the French reserves might be hastened and more troops sent to the St. Omer-Dunkirk line. Clemenceau, knowing that the

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 247.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

latter had already been refused, would have none of it and referred Haig back to the normal channels.

A second conference was held at Abbeville on the 14th attended by Haig, Milner, Lawrence, Foch, Weygand and Du Cane. Haig went over the old ground and ‘explained the *urgent need* for the French to take a more active share in the battle’, pointing out that the French reserves were too far south to stop any advance by the Germans on the Channel ports.⁹⁰ Foch began his reply by pointing out the tenacity of the British troops at Ypres during October and November 1914, but then asked Haig for his proposals. In reply, Haig requested the four divisions under General Maistre, which were concentrated in the south, be moved further north to act as a reserve for the British First Army. While Foch promised to consider Haig’s proposals, he went on to refuse a relief during the battle, and to point out that an attack could start at any point of the front, (meaning the southern sector) the French reserves now being spread out to meet this contingency. He then finished by stating that the Battle of Hazebrouck was finished. While this may have been true, as two fresh divisions, the 5th and 1st Australian, now blocked the Germans’ path to Hazebrouck, the situation to the north was still unstable. After the conference Foch relented slightly and ordered the French Tenth Army to prepare plans to move a division to Frévent, one day’s journey from the battlefield. Haig was not impressed by Foch’s generalship, writing in his diary:

Foch seems to me unmethodical and takes a “short view” of the situation. For instance, he does not look ahead and make a forecast of what may be required in a week in a certain area and arrange accordingly. He only provides from day to day sufficient troops to keep the railway accommodation filled up. Also (as at Ypres in 1914) he is very disinclined to engage *French* troops in the battle.⁹¹

Surely it was troops that Haig wanted quickly, one wonders what else he expected given that if the transport was full what else could be sent?

The next day Foch outlined to Clemenceau and Milner the reasons for his refusal to send more assistance to Haig.⁹² The Germans still had a reserve of 48 divisions which could be used anywhere between Noyon and Arras. He was particularly concerned about the Montdidier-Luce sector where the Germans had not yet dug in, another German subterfuge to keep the Allies guessing, which caused much suffering to the tired German troops.

⁹⁰ Blake, *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p. 303, Haig’s italics

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Official History, Vol II, p. 247.

By the 15th there were two French infantry divisions plus one cavalry corps behind the Lys front. In the evening Plumer agreed with General Robillot that the French infantry should relieve two of the Second Army's tired divisions. On hearing of this arrangement Foch immediately telegraphed Colonel Desticker, his liaison officer at Plumer's HQ, forbidding their use in the front line. However, Robillot, as the man on the spot, disregarded these instructions and the French 28th Division moved forward to a position three miles north-west of Kemmel while the 133rd Division made ready to replace the British 33rd covering Meteren. Later that night two brigades of French cavalry were added to the force at Meteren.

The British Third and Fourth Armies fared much better with the supply of French troops. Two French armies were being formed behind the British and by the 15 April the Fifth (Micheler) and Tenth (Maistre) Armies, each of four divisions, were in position as shown on the map. The movement of French divisions between corps, armies and *groupments* was as complex as the British, but while the Tenth Army stayed as four divisions the Fifth increased to about eight. These troops could have been put into the line to relieve tired British ones but this Foch steadfastly refused to do. His reason was the dangerous time when the exchange was taking place; this sounds more like an excuse, since this operation was something that both sides had been practising for four years. Also, it is more likely that the British would have put them on a good line behind the forward troops, so that the front could come to them. Foch was also still concerned with the threat to Paris, and there appeared to him no reason why the Germans should not restart the fighting on the Somme, while there was still the threat of an attack in Champagne. To give weight to this view the Germans had been bombarding Paris with long-range artillery which produced more psychological than material damage.

If Haig thought that his First and Second Armies would receive French reinforcements as soon as battle was joined he was mistaken. While we now know that by the 15 April the danger was over, the battle still had another two weeks to run. While Foch's statement that the battle for Hazebrouck was finished was proved correct, it must have annoyed the hard pressed British commanders at the time. The key lies in Foch's relationship with Clemenceau, which was similar to that between Haig and Lloyd George although in this case it was more moral than political. Foch considered Clemenceau an 'unbridled rake' while Clemenceau could not stand Catholic generals,

and Foch in particular.⁹³ A whispering campaign against Foch had been going on for some time, Wilson recorded in his diary: 'Foch is 'guggu', that is judgement is gone, that he is ill, etc. The usual thing'.⁹⁴ There was also mistrust between Clemenceau and the British government over the manpower question. He felt that they were not pulling their weight on the Western Front as there was a large army in the UK and conscription had not been introduced in Ireland. Against this background of mutual distrust Foch had to pick his way carefully, for to move divisions to Flanders might not have been politically possible and Foch would not have wanted to go down in history as the man who saved the British but lost Paris.

The French Army had 32 divisions in various stages of reserve out of a total of about 100.⁹⁵ According to Edmonds Foch was unwilling to use them in a defensive battle as they were untried after the mutinies.⁹⁶ However, the French troops fought well against the two German attacks against their line; they had not refused to defend French soil, but were only tired of fruitless attacks.⁹⁷ Foch felt the Lys attack was a feint to use up the Allies' reserves and 'cover a more important action in another place', perhaps against the French.⁹⁸ Thus, the reason for Foch's refusal, or unwillingness, to move French divisions north was as much political as military.

From now on, the British having weathered the storm, Foch acted in a more confident manner. During the morning of the 16th he ordered Pétain to get a division ready to move to Flanders, and in addition, the Tenth Army was to make ready to send the 34th Division to the same destination by lorry. In the afternoon another conference was held at Abbeville, those present being the same as before with the addition of the CIGS, General Wilson. On the 13th Clemenceau had asked Lloyd George to go to France for a consultation; Wilson 'feared that "the Tiger" contemplated interference in the military operations, and he dreaded what might happen were the British Prime Minister also to take a hand'.⁹⁹ Lloyd George was persuaded by Wilson that this was not the time to intervene, but after a telephone call from Clemenceau, Wilson went over in his place. Yet again, Haig pressed his case for French reinforcements. The British

⁹³ Toland, J, *No Man's Land*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), p. 65.

⁹⁴ IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 27 Feb. 1918

⁹⁵ Reserves to GQG, army groups and armies, excluding American divisions, see Official History, 1918, Vol II, p. 146.

⁹⁶ Official History, 1918, Vol, II, p. 248 and also Davidson, Sir J, *Haig - Master of the Field* (London: Nevill, 1953), p. 91.

⁹⁷ Liddell Hart, *History of the First World War*, p. 302.

⁹⁸ Foch, *Memoirs*, p. 325.

⁹⁹ Callwell, Sir CE, *Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson* (London: Cassell, 1927), Vol II, p. 90.

were now looking at forming a box around the Channel Ports protected by inundations behind which the BEF could retreat. Wilson had already contacted Foch concerning this matter on the 11th and authority was given by Foch the next day for this move. By blocking the River Aa near St Omer and opening the sluices, a flood would be created between Aire and St Omer. The flooding between St Omer and Dunkirk was to have to be created by pumping engines at Dunkirk. When Foch explained his actions on the River Aa, Wilson stated that this was inadequate. He wanted the full inundation to be commenced at once. Foch decided to go and see for himself and left for Second Army Headquarters where he gave Plumer a lecture on how to hold Kemmel. There was one positive result from all this; the French 34th Division was ordered to move north at 6.00 a.m. the next day.

The difference in style between Foch and Haig must have been noticeable to his Army commanders. After three years they had become used to Haig's almost taciturn demeanour, while Foch was full of Gallic charm and given to long discourses on the point in question. There was also a different style of command. Haig's statements were orders which were later confirmed by his staff in writing. French generals knew from experience that they should ignore the rhetoric and await the written instructions.

Wilson met Foch the next day (17th) and again pressed for the full inundation which Foch refused. Wilson then played the politician. In a note to Foch he pointed out that the BEF could continue to give battle where it stood or fall back behind the inundations. If Foch wanted the former, which Wilson knew he did, then fresh divisions, which could only be French, would be required. Foch seems to have ignored this and gone on the visit to the Belgians with Clemenceau already described, and then to Dunkirk to give orders for the making of inundations and the building of defences. Later he ordered two more French divisions to the north (39th and 154th), which were placed with other French formations into a reformed Détachment d'Armée du Nord (DAN) under General de Mitry. Thus while French divisions were assisting the British they were still under French command.

It is very noticeable that Foch was 'obstinate' in meetings and conferences with the British command, but gave orders for assistance verbally afterwards. Meetings are public occasions, minutes are kept and the participants make notes whereas telephoned instructions could always have been 'misunderstood'. During the 18 and 19 April there was further evidence of Foch operating behind the scenes when he suggested to Haig that tired British divisions might be exchanged for French ones from a quiet sector, the

so-called *roulement*. This was followed by a letter to Haig explaining that he was anxious to put fifteen French divisions behind the British Army, but could not do so unless they were exchanged for British ones.¹⁰⁰ By this device Foch could assist the British while not seeming to weaken the strength of the French line.

After discussing the matter with Milner, who had replaced Derby as Minister of War in mid-April,¹⁰¹ and gaining an assurance from Pétain that the divisions would be reconstructed before they went into the line, Haig agreed to Foch's proposal. Four divisions were reconstituted as IX Corps (Lieut.-General Sir A Hamilton Gordon) and sent to the Chemin-des-Dames, unfortunately to be the scene of the next German attack. Wilson over-reacted to this move by Foch and Haig. He felt that the BEF would lose its identity if it became mixed up with the French Army; his fears were quickly calmed by Foch, who, at the meeting at Abbeville on 27th, said that nothing would be done without Haig's approval.¹⁰²

The cordial relationship already existing between Foch and Wilson gave the former an ally in London who could explain his actions to the politicians; also, Wilson had the advantage that he spoke fluent French. In fact, as the Allies began to work closer together which meant contact at the lower level of command, rather than just through generals, the lack of bi-lingual liaison officers became a problem. Many British officers would have learned French at school, but 'la plume de ma tante' would be of little use, say, in calling up an artillery barrage from a neighbouring French division.

After the 19th there was a lull in the battle as the Germans prepared for their assault on the Monts des Flandres and Foch busied himself in the south, not returning to Flanders for ten days. The loss of Kemmel Hill by the French 28th Division on the 26 April re-focused his attention on the northern sector. Foch's immediate concern was that this new assault might cause the British to fall back on their rear lines. In a telephone call to Haig he insisted that a withdrawal of troops west of Ypres 'must not be contemplated'.¹⁰³ To add weight to this he instructed Pétain to send more artillery and aircraft to the DAN.

On 27 April the last conference at Abbeville during the battle already referred to

¹⁰⁰ Official History, 1918, Vol II, p. 367 says the letter was secret, but during the war all documents had this classification. Haig just says a letter in his diary.

¹⁰¹ Derby became Ambassador in Paris.

¹⁰² IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 27 April 1918.

¹⁰³ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 437.

was held.¹⁰⁴ The day before, Haig had discussed the military agenda with Wilson and Milner. To give some relief to his by now worn out divisions he wanted the French to take over the line held by his two northern corps - XXII and II in the Ypres salient, which would release about five divisions. Wilson wanted to have a contingency plan in case the Germans made more gains. The subject of *roulement*, already mentioned above, was settled and Haig moved on to discuss the relief of II and XXII Corps. He proposed that these formations should change places with the French troops behind the British Third Army. As might be expected Foch did not agree, using his usual argument against relieving troops in the middle of a battle. However, he proposed to visit Flanders to see the situation for himself. The business of salt water inundations and retreats to rear lines was brushed aside. Foch then set off to visit Generals Plumer, de Mitry and Gillain, the Belgian chief-of-staff. Each was subjected to the usual lecture, but afterwards Foch made arrangements to send one extra division to the north and relieve the three French divisions which had been mauled in the battle for Kemmel. So much for not relieving divisions in the middle of a battle!

On the 29th the Germans made their unsuccessful attack on the Scherpenberg and so ended the Battles of the Lys.

There were differing views on the performance of Foch and the French Army during the Michael and Georgette offensives. The British Army thought that they had been let down by their allies. Lieut.-General Godley, commenting on the draft of the Official History, wrote to Edmonds that 'you let Foch and the French down too easily. It was obvious to us all that we were getting no help from Foch, and that the troops he did send reluctantly and under pressure, were no good'.¹⁰⁵ He went on to complain about the French reluctance to move forward to retake Kemmel Hill. Brigadier-General Croft was much more to the point 'The 28 French Division did not distinguish itself on the 25th, and any comments on their part of the action must be derogatory'.¹⁰⁶ These were private letters, but in a review of *Tome VI* of the French Official History in the *Army Quarterly* the reviewer commented that:

Very little is said about the loss of Kemmel by the French; all we are told is "the French garrison of Kemmel [village] and Kemmel Hill decimated by the bombardment, pressed on all sides, had yielded bit by bit after a heroic resistance".[author's translation] Those who saw the French

¹⁰⁴ The main reason for the conference was to discuss the Pershing-Milner agreement on the allocation of American units to the BEF which had been signed without reference to the French.

¹⁰⁵ PRO CAB 45/123: Godley to Edmonds.

¹⁰⁶ PRO CAB 45/122: W Croft (GOC 27th Brigade, 9th Division) to Edmonds.

troops leaving Kemmel Hill without any attempt at resistance will hardly agree with this account.¹⁰⁷

Haig also had a poor opinion of the French. On the 29 April he told Milner:

of certain bad work of the French Staffs during the recent concentrations, e.g., when a French Division is moving by rail, the Transportation service never knows what is going to arrive; in fact total lack of method. At the beginning of the battle, Divisions arrived near Montdidier with 50 rounds small arm ammunition per man, no cooks, no Artillery, so men were not only half starving but had no means for fighting!¹⁰⁸

This comment shows that the arrangements for mutual support had not been worked out very well.¹⁰⁹ After describing the loss of Kemmel Hill Haig commented ‘What Allies to fight with’.¹¹⁰ Edmonds on the other hand was full of praise for the French. Summarising the conference on the 14 April he stated that: ‘Though General Foch’s decision cost the British Army many lives, and its leaders many anxious hours, in the circumstances one cannot but admire his judgement of the situation and his resistance to the very heavy pressure put upon him.’¹¹¹ He also makes the point in his reflections on the Spring Offensives that ‘The appointment of General Foch to co-ordinate and control the Allied efforts prevented the disaster of the separation of the two Armies.’¹¹² It was difficult for Edmonds to be critical of the French as at the time the first two 1918 volumes were published as Pétain was the French Minister of War. In addition, both Foch and Pétain had been made Marshals of France, as much a civil honour as a military one, being a position that had a considerable aura of mystique for the French people. So, to avoid a row, Edmonds took the easy course and said nothing. What Edmonds did not explain was the political pressure Foch was under. Certainly, Foch did the best he could for his British allies, and even though it may not have been as much as Haig wanted, he was the only man with sufficient stature and prestige to do the job.

Might Haig have saved himself all these arguments with Foch if he had supported the formation of the General Reserve? It was unlikely, since presumably the divisions allocated by Haig and Pétain would have remained in their respective sectors, Pétain would still have lost his nerve, and Foch was the man in charge of the Military Representatives at Versailles. The SWC was not part of any command structure and while Rawlinson would probably have given Haig the British reserves, or Haig would

¹⁰⁷ *Army Quarterly* Vol XXIX, Jan 1935.

¹⁰⁸ Blake, *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p. 304.

¹⁰⁹ Hankey, *The Supreme Command*, Vol. II, p. 804.

¹¹⁰ Blake, *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig*, p.305.

¹¹¹ Official History, 1918, Vol II, p. 315.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 486.

have taken them without asking, the same difficulties over the French formations would have arisen. One cannot imagine Lawrence or Davidson being sent to Versailles with a 'chitty' for 20 French divisions. No, in the end it was better that the divisions remained under their respective commanders-in-chief.

Haig may have had a hidden agenda in his continuous demand for French divisions. He was looking to take the offensive in 1919, when the American presence would shift the manpower pendulum in the Allies' favour, and knew that there were few British drafts available, once the mobile reserves had been used up. If the Germans continued to hammer his army, when victory came Britain might take third place at the victors' table and the sacrifice might have been for very little. It was thus imperative that the French took some of the strain.

There has been much criticism of Haig's conduct of the Great War battles;¹¹³ but, surely his main task was to interface with his superiors at home and the commanders-in-chief of the other members of the coalition. There were matters that only he could deal with; for example, none of the British Army commanders had the necessary authority to negotiate for the supply of French reserves to aid the BEF. During March and April, we see Haig the master politician at work; first subordinating himself to Foch, then plugging away at conference after conference, until he received some measure of what he wanted. This shows the need for the supreme command to have been in place long before the Spring Offensives, but it took the brink of disaster to bring it about. The gentleman's agreement between Haig and Pétain was a fudge, to stop others becoming involved, and would never have worked; had the situation been reversed, Haig could not have sent divisions to aid the French without putting the BEF in jeopardy. For once, Henry Wilson was probably right, when he claimed that Haig was 'living off the charity of Pétain'.¹¹⁴ The main result of this frustration was that by the end of April 1918 Haig and Foch had achieved a working relationship that was to pay dividends during the summer and autumn.

¹¹³ For instance see Winter, D, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment*, (London: Penguin edition, 1993).

¹¹⁴ IWM, Wilson MSS: Diary, 6 March 1918.

Chapter 7

THE PRESS AND THE SPRING OFFENSIVES

The Spring Offensives give us an opportunity to look at a number of aspects of war reporting: how accurate the reporting was, what the public was told and how the newspapers dealt with retreat. The government had to balance keeping the public informed against keeping public sympathy and support for the war. Until the spring of 1918 the newspapers had mainly covered Allied offensives, which could always be reported as going to plan, as the real objectives were obviously never published. A German offensive would give the problem of how much of the enemy's success should be reported, and how British failure was to be represented. In addition, failures by Britain's allies would require careful handling, as would the dismissal of a full general, or the appointment of a French one to command a British field marshal. The newspapers were also the main means of spreading anti-German propaganda, to maintain public support for the war; this was achieved by a continuous reinforcement of the concept of 'the beastly Hun'.

Before the war it had been planned that approved war correspondents would accompany the BEF to France. In the event, these arrangements were cancelled by Lord Kitchener and the army sailed into a news blackout. Initially the public was starved of news; this state of affairs could not go on and so Kitchener relented slightly. The war would be covered by an officer appointed for the purpose. On the basis that he had written a book,¹ Churchill suggested to Kitchener Colonel E D Swinton, who had been Assistant Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence before the war and at the time was serving as Deputy Director of Railways with the BEF. Thus on 7 September 1914 was born the 'Eyewitness' system which lasted for ten months. The newspaper

¹ Swinton, Sir ED, *The Defence of Duffer's Drift* (London: Leo Cooper reprint, 1990, first published 1907). The book describes a series of dreams dealing with the defence of the 'drift' during the Boer War. In them Captain Backsight Forethought learns a series of lessons which leads to success in the last dream. The message is that junior officers should use their initiative. Could it be that the BEF had an embryo

proprietors resented Swinton doing their job for them, and as time went on, and the war was not over by Christmas 1914, they began to apply pressure on the government to honour the pre-war agreement and allow war correspondents in France. Phillip Knightley has shown that it was pressure from the USA to improve the war reporting that made the Cabinet press GHQ to allow a few correspondents in France.² In June 1915, six correspondents representing the major dailies and agencies arrived at GHQ at first for a short tour, but this core remained for the rest of the war. Others came and went but there were never more than about twenty at any one time.³ The post of Official Correspondent was now redundant, so Swinton left to pursue his career with the tank. Initially the war correspondents had been subject to severe censorship, but by 1918 the BEF had accepted them and they had become part of the GHQ team. Before each major action briefings were held and after battle reports were made available to them.

The government imposed censorship immediately war broke out. This formalised an agreement between the Admiralty, War Office and the Press that the latter would not publish matters considered sensitive by the former.⁴ 'The Censorship' became a large organisation covering, besides newspapers, overseas telephone, telegraph and postal communications. Here we are only concerned with that portion that dealt with the news - The Press Bureau. The instrument which gave the government its powers was the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). This Act was very far ranging, covering the collection, recording, publishing or communicating any information about the army or navy (Regulation 18). Spreading rumours or 'statements likely to cause disaffection to His Majesty' (Regulation 27), which included anything which would deter recruitment, made the perpetrator liable to prosecution. Just in case something had not been covered a catch-all clause of publishing information useful to the enemy was included. Initially offences could be tried by the military or naval Courts Martial but this was later changed, after objections from the Press, to civilian courts. Although there were a number of refinements, these provisions remained in force until the Press Bureau was closed on the 30 April 1919. The government was at pains to show that while the Press was censored it was not controlled, therefore opinion in the form of editorials and articles was allowed, together with German communiqués. An editor had

defensive expert waiting to be discovered?

² Knightley, *The First Casualty*, pp. 94-5.

³ Basil Clarke, Philip Gibbs, Percival Phillips, William Beach Thomas, H Perry Robinson and Herbert Russell.

⁴ Cook, Sir E, *The Press in Wartime* (London: Macmillan, 1920), p. 39.

two choices before publication: submit the material to the Press Bureau or ‘publish and be damned’, thus risking prosecution. Which course was chosen probably depended on the newspaper’s attitude to the government. *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* in general were not contentious while at the other extreme the *Morning Post* and the *Globe* were more radical.

After the first few days of the March battle, it must have been obvious that the BEF was conducting a fighting retreat, and while the facts could not be withheld, they would require careful presentation. In general, the public was informed of the situation remarkably quickly. Many newspaper editions contained a map showing the extent of the German advance, and reports on the situation augmented by dispatches from GHQ and the paper’s war correspondent. It is this presentation of the facts that is interesting. Bad news is never welcome, especially in war-time; however, there is often something positive that can be reported, usually that the people on the spot are doing all they can. Thus, over the years the bearers of bad news have learned the art of ‘deflection’: accentuate the positive aspects of what happened while minimising the negative parts.

War reporting in the newspapers may be divided into GHQ communiqués, dispatches from war correspondents, editorial comment and what may be termed pure propaganda.

The GHQ dispatches were of no use to anyone. Brief and sterile, they gave almost no information, which of course was the intention. The start of the German offensive was telegraphed at 10.27 a.m. as follows: ‘A heavy bombardment was opened by the enemy shortly before dawn this morning against our whole front from the neighbourhood of Vendeuil, south of St. Quentin to the River Scarpe’.⁵ The report then went on to list the previous night’s raids. Similarly, on the 9 April ‘Early this morning the enemy’s artillery developed great activity on a front extending from La Bassée to the south of Armentières’. For some reason GHQ found it necessary to report even when things were quiet. These dispatches detailed raids, both British and German, and the odd artillery barrage. It would surely have had more effective to have reported by exception. German reports were just as short, but the style was more ‘bullish’: ‘French Divisions brought up from Noyon were defeated at Fréniches and Bethancourt. Bussy was captured. We are standing on the heights to the north of Noyon’.⁶

⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 22 March 1918.

⁶ *The Times*, 27 March 1918.

The detailed news came from the war correspondents' dispatches. These were very similar in style, and due to the 'pooling' system contained the same news stories.⁷ Discounting small factual errors that were bound to occur, the content varies from reasonably accurate descriptions to wild flights of fancy with various shades of grey in between. The theme running through all the correspondents' writing was of units and formation standing firm against overwhelming odds, while the men remained in good heart.

The reporting of some actions shows that the war correspondents were privy to after battle reports. Nothing was said about the sacrifice of the 4th Guards Brigade until 2 May, when the action was described in most war correspondents' reports.⁸ The articles specifically mentioned the bravery of Private Jacotine and Captain Pryce, Pryce's message about fighting back-to-back, and the corporal in his company who got away. Also, the writing was completely factual, there being no embroidery whatsoever. Such detail as this could surely have only come from a report rather than a participant in the action. All the details were mentioned in the brigade after battle report.

The pooling system used for collecting war news both in France and London meant that there was little variation between the newspapers in this respect. The news stories given above are contained in most of the other papers. This was not so with editorials, because opinion was allowed a free reign so that there could be no accusation of a muzzled press. This can be illustrated by looking at the two ends of the spectrum. *The Times* generally supported the government in the national interest while the *Morning Post* may be considered the organ of the War Office.

The *Morning Post* pulled no punches right from the start. On 25 March its editorial attacked the sending of troops to minor theatres.

This great battle teaches us all - even the least imaginative and the most ignorant of war - the vital nature of the Western Front. It is here that the war is being decided, here and upon the North Sea. What would we give now for all those glorious legions we have sent to the ends of the earth at the behest of our amateurs in strategy! Even the dazzling glories of Jerusalem and the vital junction of Muslimie fade into insignificance in the light of this conflict on the Somme.

Even morale boosting could be used to start a campaign to bring back Sir William Robertson. After commenting on the confidence generated by a message sent by the King to his troops and an open letter to Haig from Lloyd George, the editorial

⁷ It had been decided early on by the war correspondents that this was not the time or place for professional rivalry and so there would be no scoops.

concluded with:

Our Army organisation, both at Whitehall and in the field, may be trusted to justify that confidence, although perhaps we may be permitted to regret the absence of our greatest soldier from the post of supreme direction. Sir William Robertson, as the Government and country know, foresaw this situation. We hope we may be allowed to recall the attacks on Sir William Robertson which were allowed to appear in the Press were mainly on the ground that he was a stupid Westerner, and that he said "Non, non," to all the demands for a diversion of troops to the peaks of the Dolomites and the vital junction of Muslimie. Muslimie, which is somewhere near the Taurus mountains, was believed to be the navel of world strategy then. Now it is the "great strategic point of Amiens".⁹

This was followed the next day by an editorial on whether the BEF was surprised or not which concludes:

But if they were not surprised, did they not ask for men? And were the men given or were the men refused? Did Sir William Robertson warn the Government of the situation that was certain to arise when the Germans brought their Eastern Armies over? And, did the Government take the measures which Sir William Robertson advised them to take? These are the questions that are urgent because the danger is urgent.¹⁰

Finally on the 18 April under the headline 'Bring Back Robertson' the paper gave its final blast on the matter.

Our beloved Prime Minister is frantically busying himself in obtaining men. Does he remember how many times Sir William Robertson asked for men, not after but a year before the defeat, and how many times was he refused? Does he remember also how Sir William Robertson argued against the extension of the British line, which beat out too thin the fine metal of our defence? He is busying himself now about more men. Let us remind him that in war provision should be made not after a battle but before it, and that Sir William Robertson desired to make that provision. And who prevented that provision being made? Why Mr Lloyd George who understands the temper of England so little that he feared a social revolution. But numbers are not the only necessity in war. Organisation, leadership, a sound mind at the top, these are even more important. As long as Sir William Robertson was Chief of the Staff both the Army and the nation knew that they would not be let down by any lack of these qualities in the supreme direction of the war.

These editorials have been quoted in full to show just how far newspapers were allowed to go in expressing their opinions without fear of prosecution. *The Times* was much more supportive of the government. In a call to mobilise Britain's strength to the last available man the government was urged to stop looking back at what might have

⁸ The report was delayed due to the brigadier-general and his brigade major being gassed.

⁹ *Morning Post*, 26 March 1918.

been and who can be blamed.

We trust that the government are under no misapprehension about the immense reserve of driving-power which they have behind them at this crisis in an anxious, an understanding, and a thoroughly united people.¹¹

However, even *The Times* might contain the occasional barb. Reporting the speech by Lloyd George in Parliament when he pointed out that the attack was foreseen ‘by Sir Henry Wilson and his colleagues at Versailles’ an editorial commented.

‘We would only add here that, when the proper time comes, it will be necessary to ask what steps were taken to act upon it during the vital weeks of February and the first half of March.’¹²

At the time no-one would have been shocked by the *Morning Post* and similar papers such as *The Globe*, in fact it would have been expected, people buy the newspaper that reflects their views.

The main message that the Press was trying to get across to the public was that the Germans were trying to force a decision. The headline ‘Greatest Battle of the War’ appeared in many newspapers.¹³ Together with phrases such as ‘50 miles of our line attacked on a vaster scale than ever before’¹⁴ and ‘Enemy’s Terrific Blow’¹⁵ the editorials confirmed the seriousness of the situation. On the 23 March *The Times* opened with:

The British Army, already tried in this war in a hundred fierce conflicts, is battling today for the safety and the liberty of these islands and of Western civilisation.

The war correspondents had been preparing the public for the coming battle.

Philip Gibbs wrote in *The Times* on the 19 February:

Any moment now we may see the beginning of the enemy’s last and desperate effort to end the war by a decisive victory, for the offensive which he has been preparing for months is imminent.

Then, in his despatch on the first day of the battle he wrote:

The attack already appears to be on a formidable scale, with a vast amount of artillery and masses of men, and there is reason to believe that it is indeed the beginning of the great offensive advertised for so long a time and with such ferocious menaces by the enemy’s agents in neutral countries.¹⁶

Even as late as July the German intentions were being hammered home:

¹⁰ *Morning Post*, 27 March 1918.

¹¹ *The Times*, 27 March 1918.

¹² *The Times*, 10 April 1918.

¹³ *Daily Express*, 22 March and *Morning Post*, 23 March and for example.

¹⁴ *Daily Express*, 22 March 1918.

¹⁵ *Morning Post*, 23 March 1918.

Gradually, after the monstrous efforts of the enemy to smash us to pieces from the opening of his offensive on March 21, we are regaining power of the initiative ...¹⁷

The newspapers were quick to take up the question of whether the BEF was surprised by the German attack. On the 22 March *The Times* reported that: 'Three days ago the British Cabinet received information from Headquarters in France that a great German attack was going to be launched immediately'.¹⁸ Continuing in an editorial the next day: 'In the initial stages, the German offensive contained no surprises. Our Army was not caught unawares. Nothing in the war has been more remarkable than the unerring accuracy with which our Intelligence has lately divined the intentions of the enemy'.¹⁹ On the 9 April Lloyd George confirmed in Parliament that the German offensive had been foreseen. 'The Prime Minister disclosed the fact that the exact tactical form which it would take, the place where the blow would be delivered, and almost the very number of divisions that would be used, had all been predicted so long ago as January by Sir Henry Wilson and his colleagues at Versailles.'²⁰

Generally, units and formations were not mentioned by name. One exception to this rule was the successful defence of Givenchy by the 55th Division on 9 April. News of its action appeared in the newspapers the next day; the division was even referred to by name and the fact that it contained 'Lancashire men' was made known. Philip Gibbs, who wrote the article, emphasised that there were three attacks, each of which was repulsed, and that the captured German instructions said that Givenchy was defended by six companies of tired men.²¹ Even GHQ threw caution to the wind and issued a special communiqué on the division's achievement.

German gains north and south of Ypres had enlarged the Salient which was in danger of being pinched out. While acknowledging the sacrifices made the previous year the public were informed of the necessity of pulling back. For example, the usually strident *Morning Post* published the following report 'from a special correspondent':

Our front in Flanders has been straightened and eased of a dangerous salient which raised its head across the Passchendaele Ridge. We have withdrawn voluntarily from the ground taken last year, and have come back unhindered or delayed to the lower battlefield in a wide curve round Ypres, still retaining that ruin, and bending with great freedom past the

¹⁶ *The Times*, 22 March 1918.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 27 July 1918.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 22 March 1918.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 23 March 1918.

²⁰ *The Times*, 10 April 1918.

²¹ *The Times*, 10 April 1918.

cellars of Wytschaete into a position behind Bailleul. It is not a pleasant thing to record, but the situation created by the German drive across the Lys has made this re-adjustment necessary, and it must be accepted as the fortune of war.²²

The *Daily Mirror* took much the same line over both Armentières and the Salient:

It has probably been in part a sentimental reason which impelled us to hold the bulge that the town made in our line, very much as we held the Ypres salient because of the memory of gallant fights that cling around it.²³

Haig's 'Backs to the Wall' order' was printed in full in most papers, very often with little comment, allowing it to speak for itself. The *Morning Post*, however, commented in its editorial:

The special Order of the Day issued by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig to all ranks of the British Army in France and Flanders will become historic, as the high call that rallied the indomitable valour of the British soldier to victory. When Vice-Admiral Lord Nelson hoisted his famous signal before the battle of Trafalgar his officers and men said among themselves that the Commander-in-Chief had no need to remind them of their duty, and they were very likely right.²⁴

The *Daily Mail* was a little more down-to-earth:

...there may be no mistaking the emergency or misunderstanding what the nation and its Army are called upon to do. The nation which proves itself capable of any sacrifice for freedom will assuredly prevail over a nation such as Germany that only seeks the subjugation of other peoples. The Army in the same spirit will act on the words of Sir Douglas Haig's moving order. "Victory belongs to the side which holds out longest". We know our men will put forth all their heroism with Spartan firmness and tenacity.²⁵

An advertising copywriter quickly saw the potential of Haig's order. Under the heading 'Is your back to the wall? Sir Douglas Haig's message carries a message for you', the public were exhorted to 'Buy War Bonds'.²⁶

The examples above show that some news items were reported with little embellishment. However, others would require careful handling if offending Britain's allies was to be avoided.

The complete collapse of the Portuguese front required special handling. The heaviness of the preliminary bombardment, the width of their front, and the number of opposing troops were all emphasised. Many of the articles had a basis of fact which was

²² *Morning Post*, 18 April, probably by Percival Phillips.

²³ *Daily Mirror*, 12 April 1918.

²⁴ *Morning Post*, 15 April 1918.

²⁵ *Daily Mail*, 13 April 1918.

²⁶ *Morning Post*, 19 April 1918.

embellished. Gibbs wrote of a battalion of Portuguese around Lacouture who fought until they had used up all of their ammunition, called for more, and then 'went on stubbornly clinging to their positions, until a large proportion had been killed'. It has been shown that the Portuguese artillery did better than their infantry, although many guns were captured intact and used by the Germans. In the newspapers the Portuguese field guns that survived the bombardment were turned on the Germans at point blank range, and the retreating gunners brought the breech blocks of their weapons away with them. The Portuguese 'heavies' were working under British supervision and did well. When describing this Gibbs stated 'and the British Commanding Officer is loud in praise of the splendid way they "'stuck it"' with their British comrades'.²⁷ Another correspondent, Hamilton Fyfe, who was syndicated to many papers and gave a similar story to Gibbs.

The loss of Kemmel Hill by the French 28th Division on the 26 April could not be reported as the rout that has been described in a previous chapter. Anglo-French relations would have become more strained. There were two options: say little about the French, which is what the *Daily Mirror* did, there being plenty of British action going on in the same area; or make it up. Both Gibbs and Hamilton Fyfe gave accounts of what happened on the hill which can only be described as fantasy. Under the headline 'Fall of Kemmel' Gibbs described a heroic stand by the French garrison: 'French troops had sworn that they would never leave Kemmel while they lived'. Aircraft reconnaissance in the afternoon showed the top of the hill 'crowned with blue as defenders, facing both ways made their last stand!'²⁸ Hamilton Fyfe's prose was similar: 'The French infantry on the hill had received orders to defend it with the utmost energy and to the last. I have heard that the General told his men that "they were to stay on it until they died rather than retreat," and his command was implicitly obeyed.'²⁹

Gibbs' dispatches were collated into a series of books after the war. In the volume dealing with 1918 he wrote in an Author's Note: 'My daily record is here printed just as I wrote it with only some names of battalions and numbers of divisions added to my narrative'.³⁰ Comparing his book with the original shows that much of the text quoted above was edited, the second quotation has become 'Small parties of them on the west of the hill held out until midday or beyond, according to reports of out

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *The Times*, 27 April 1918.

²⁹ *Morning Post*, 27 April 1918.

³⁰ Gibbs, P, *Open Warfare - The Way to Victory* (London: Heinemann, 1919).

airmen, who flew over them; but by nine o'clock in the morning, owing to gaps made by the enemy, the main French line was compelled to draw back from Kemmel'.³¹

The subordinating of a British field marshal to a French general might be expected to cause adverse comment in the newspapers. This was not so. The announcement of Foch's new position came after over a week of bad news from the Western Front; obviously, desperate situations call for desperate measures. The reason given for Foch's appointment was the creation of an Allied unified command similar to that of the Germans. Thus, when the story broke headlines were typically 'General Foch in sole command',³² or 'Great Britain and France under one Chief',³³ the latter with pictures of Haig, Foch and Pershing. The newspapers missed, or were not aware of, the subtle differences between the results of the Doullens and Beauvais Conferences; also, the anomalous position of the Belgians was not picked up. Foch's qualifications for the job seem to have been more important than his actual duties. The *Illustrated London News* carried a picture of Foch with the caption 'He has by consent of the British, American and Belgian governments been appointed Generalissimo of the Western Front. Before the war he was acknowledged as a foremost writer on tactics and strategy by Europe. His brilliant and masterly tactics won the battle of the Marne ... he is sixty-five years of age, but with the physical and mental powers of a man of forty'.³⁴ The next week's edition carried a full page picture, with a quotation from Lloyd George speaking in Parliament: 'The enemy has had the incalculable advantage of fighting as one Army. To meet this the Allies have, since the battle began, taken a most important decision. With the cordial co-operation of the British and French Commanders-in-Chief, General Foch has been charged by the British French and American Governments to co-ordinate the action of the Allied Armies on the Western Front.'³⁵ There were differences in emphasis between papers. On the 16 April *The Times* carried the official announcement of the appointment 'The widest powers have been given to General Foch by the French and British Governments in order that he may act, and that his actions will not be questioned, an absolute agreement on this subject having been come to between the two Governments interested. One united Anglo-French-American Army has thus been constituted'. While the *Daily Express* stated on the same date: 'It is officially

³¹ Gibbs, *Open Warfare*, p. 301.

³² *Morning Post*, 30 March 1918.

³³ *Daily Graphic*, 1 April 1918.

³⁴ *Illustrated London News*, 6 April 1918.

³⁵ *Illustrated London News*, 13 April 1918.

announced that the British and French Governments have agreed to confer upon General Foch the title of Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies in France'. What the newspapers did not ask was: why had it taken so long? Instead, they concentrated very much on Foch's co-ordination of Allied efforts on the Marne in 1914, the intervening years were hardly mentioned. The *Illustrated London News* related, in a short article about the Marne, the following conversation between Foch and Sir John French. 'At the end of October 1914 he wakened Marshal French at St. Omer. It was one o'clock in the morning. "Marshal your line has broken," he declared. "Yes", replied the Commander-in-Chief. "Have you reinforcements?" "Not a thing." "Then I will send you some."'"³⁶ A most interesting conversation considering that neither spoke the others language! Or, was someone aware that Haig had spent the previous month trying to prise French troops from Foch. There was very little here for the newspapers to criticise had they wished to, probably due to the agreement by all parties to Foch's appointment. An editorial in the *Daily Mail* summed up the situation:

The appointment of General Foch to co-ordinate the manoeuvres of the Allies in no sense supersedes Sir Douglas Haig, but has taken place at his request. It secures complete unity - a priceless asset - on the side of the Allies, and means that the movements of Sir Douglas Haig and General Pétain will be linked together In General Foch, who is a great friend and admirer of Sir Douglas Haig, our troops and the French have perfect confidence. He is not only a man of action, but a man of thought, his military writings have long been famous.³⁷

At the tactical level pictures were used to emphasise Anglo-French co-operation, again with some journalistic licence. For example, the *Illustrated London News* carried a set of photographs of British tommies and French *poilus* under the caption 'British and French Divisions fighting shoulder to shoulder by regiment and battalion'.³⁸

The word retreat was not used. Instead the line was 'pushed' or 'forced' back, under strong enemy pressure, usually with a comment on the high cost in casualties to the Germans, British losses never being mentioned directly. Headlines such as 'Foe's 400,000 Losses'³⁹ and 'Small Gains for Colossal Sacrifice'⁴⁰ were used to emphasise the price the Germans were paying for their success. The estimated German casualties varied considerably;⁴¹ for example, *The Globe* reported the *French Journal* as saying:

³⁶ *Illustrated London News*, 27 April 1918.

³⁷ *Daily Mail*, 1 April 1918.

³⁸ *Illustrated London News*, 13 April 1918.

³⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 26 March 1918.

⁴⁰ *Morning Post*, 23 March 1918.

⁴¹ Official History, 1918, Vol II, p. 490, gives 348,300 officers and men for 21st March to 30th April.

‘According to calculations at the British General Headquarters, 250,000 German bodies lie on the ground recently taken by the Germans’.⁴² Reports from the USA alleged that the Germans were willing to take enormous casualties to gain their ends: ‘According to information which has filtered into Washington from Germany the price which Hindenburg and his lieutenants are willing to pay for their attempts to achieve victory on the Western Front amounts to a million and a half casualties.’⁴³ The general impression was of the BEF taking a huge toll of massed German infantry. Pictorially, it was the artillery that handed out this punishment; for example, on the 6 April the *Illustrated London News* carried a double page picture of ‘gas masked gunners inflicting terrible casualties’, with the sub-text ‘The German command has bought such success as it has obtained on the Western Front at a huge sacrifice in men who have been sent forward in masses with the usual disregard of life, in full view of our artillery’. Again, in the *Illustrated London News*, on the 27 April there was another two page picture of 18 pdrs ‘firing over open sights’ with the text; ‘There has never been such a killing of Germans since the war began, ... artillery holding back reckless German onslaughts ... Our gunners were firing hour after hour at large bodies of Germans’.

The RFC received credit for harassing the German lines of communication. This type of action is difficult to report but makes striking headlines. For example, on the 29 March the *Daily Mirror* reported ‘26 tons of bombs dropped and 250,000 rounds fired by our pilots’ on the previous day, under the headline ‘Marching Huns bombed and riddled with fire’.⁴⁴

The names of individual officers are rarely mentioned, it was almost as if the war was being fought incognito. Brigadier-General G G S Carey was an exception, his name being mentioned in Parliament by Lloyd George on the 9 April: ‘At one point there was a serious gap, which might have let the enemy into Calais. He gathered together signalmen, engineers, labour battalions, odds and ends of machine-gunners - every one, and threw them into the line and closed up that gap.’⁴⁵ In the same edition, in a column ‘By the Way’ which contained odd bits and pieces of news, the public were given details of Carey’s career: ‘Brigadier-General Carey, to whom the Prime Minister referred in his speech last night as having held a gap in our line for six days with a scratch force of labour men, signallers and mechanics is an old artilleryman. He fought with great

⁴² *The Globe*, 10 April 1918.

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 17 April 1918.

⁴⁴ Official History, 1918, Vol II, p. 38, gives 22 tons and 313,345 rounds.

⁴⁵ *Daily Express*, 10 April 1918.

distinction in South Africa. He has clearly proved himself to be a most resourceful soldier, with a keen eye for the right thing to do in an emergency'. Carey's Force was formed on the 26 March from various odds and ends, including '500 American railway troops who had no military training',⁴⁶ and numbered about 3,000 men, to man a rearward defence line about Amiens as the only reserve for XIX Corps (Lieut.-General Sir H E Watts) and came into action the next day when this position became the front line. It remained in the line until the 5 April 'when its troops were sent back to their own formations'.⁴⁷ His fame spread to the USA, perhaps due to the American troops under his command, and the *New York Times* commented: 'The more we hear about Brigadier-General Sandeman Carey and the scratch force which he picked up from nowhere to stop the German host, the more certain it appears that this is one of those occurrences which happen once or twice in each great war and keep poets and painters and orators busy for a good many years afterwards.'⁴⁸

This band of amateurs was just what the papers wanted, with the added bonus that its leader could be named. However, this does show the danger of highlighting individuals. Carey's Force held only a small part of the line but its contribution was blown out of all proportion to its actual contribution. Allowing the naming of individual soldiers could have led to all sorts of problems, as shown by Carey's case. It would have been easy for ambitious officers to make the authorities and the public aware of their exploits and thus enhance their promotion prospects. This had happened in the South African War and hence the pendulum swung to the other extreme of 'no advertising'.

The naming of individual soldiers could have caused suffering to their loved ones at home. Confirmation that a soldier was dead took months if his body was not recovered immediately from the battlefield. There was always a chance that he had been taken prisoner and the lists of prisoners took some time to reach Britain via the Red Cross in Geneva. Referring to the reporting of the 4th Guards Brigade, there was hope that Captain Pryce was a prisoner-of-war. Private Jacotine came from Ceylon and it would have been terrible for his parents to learn of his death from the newspaper rather than official sources.

Another soldier who needed introducing to the public was Sir Henry Wilson,

⁴⁶ Official History, 1918, Vol I, p. 507.

⁴⁷ Official History, 1918, Vol II, p. 95.

⁴⁸ Quoted in the *Morning Post*, 17 April 1918

who replaced Sir William Robertson as CIGS on the 18 February. Wilson had not been a success as an operational commander; so, with little to write the newspapers made it up. Under the headline 'An expert on the Western Front' the *Illustrated London News* told its readers that Wilson was 'Professionally held in the highest regard at Army Headquarters as a soldier of exceptionally brilliant talents and attainments'.⁴⁹ A fortnight later the same periodical published another picture of Wilson. The caption stated that he was an 'Expert on the topography of the Western Front, a strategist of exceptional skill'. It went on: 'he gained his topographical knowledge during cycling tours before the war'.⁵⁰

On the 27 March General Gough, commander of the ill-fated Fifth Army, was replaced by General Rawlinson and was sent home on the 3 April after Haig's failure to intercede on his behalf with Lloyd George. By then rumours of Gough's dismissal had begun to circulate, because on that day the *Daily Graphic* carried a picture of Gough, in civilian clothes wearing a bowler hat, with the caption 'General Sir H Gough VC who according to a widely circulated but unofficial report has relinquished the command of the Fifth Army'.⁵¹ In the same publication there appeared a photograph of Rawlinson: 'General Sir Henry Rawlinson said to have succeeded to the command of the Fifth Army which stood the early shock of the battle'. Lieut.-General Ivor Maxse, who commanded XVIII Corps under Gough, has left us an example of how these rumours start: On the 29 March he wrote to his brother Leo, owner of the *National Review*: 'I have just said goodbye to Gough - much to my regret - and feel he has been made a scapegoat'. The letter goes on to praise Gough and ends up 'Rawly has turned up'.⁵² On the 9 April Lloyd George made a statement in Parliament which was widely reported:

Until the whole of the circumstances which led to the retirement of the 5th Army - its failure to hold the line on the Somme and perhaps the failure to adequately destroy the bridges - are explained, it would be unfair to censure the general in command, General Gough. But until the circumstances are cleared up it would be equally unfair to the British Army to retain his services in the field. The War Cabinet therefore thought it necessary to recall him until the facts are fully explained and laid before the Government by their military advisers.⁵³

While the editorials remained silent - perhaps warned off - mischief could be

⁴⁹ *Illustrated London News*, 25 February 1918

⁵⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 9 March 1918

⁵¹ An award which he had not received, although his father, uncle and brother had all won the medal.

⁵² WSRO, Maxse MSS, T216/7: Ivor Maxse to Leo Maxse, 29 March 1918.

made in the House. On the 11 April, in answer to a question Bonar Law, standing in for Lloyd George, refused to be drawn about who was in command, he made the point that now was not the time for an enquiry. Thus, with the attack on the Lys in full swing Gough became yesterday's news.

The one individual who could be named was Sir Douglas Haig. Headlines such as 'Haig back to the Somme'⁵⁴ or 'Splendid Report from Haig'⁵⁵ show that his name was synonymous with the BEF, but there is no evidence of a 'cult of personality'. However, the main news about Haig concerned the appointment of Foch as Generalissimo.

The bad news from France must have caused great concern, and so there were many attempts to allay the public's fears. On the 22nd March Bonar Law stated in the House of Commons that 'Our outpost troops have withdrawn to the battle zone' adding that 'this was what was intended on our part in the event of such an attack', and that enemy gains were expected 'as many military writers had also pointed out'.⁵⁶ Later, in an open letter to Haig, Lloyd George promised everything the country could provide in support:

At home we are prepared to do all in our power to help in the true spirit of comradeship. The men necessary to replace all casualties, and the guns and machine-guns required to make good those lost are either now in France or already on their way, and still further reinforcements of men and guns are ready to be thrown into the battle.⁵⁷

As the battle progressed the mood became more reflective:

Perhaps the tendency of the majority since the big German offensive began has been to indulge in too pessimistic a view. That is excusable. The nation was not prepared for so serious a setback as has happened. And because there has not been an encounter on a vast scale for a considerable time, we were liable to imagine the adverse events of a few days were of decisive importance.

The article concluded:

Words fail us, as they have failed Sir Douglas Haig, to express our admiration for the men who have for nearly a month defied the Germans' most determined efforts to pierce their line.⁵⁸

Perhaps the greatest deflection from the bad news from the front was unintentional. For those at home life went on, but perhaps not as normal. This is

⁵³ *Daily Mail*, 10 April 1918. There were no censorship restrictions on the reporting of Parliament.

⁵⁴ *Daily Mail*, 25 March 1918.

⁵⁵ *Morning Post*, 28 March 1918. Referring to the failure of the German attack at Arras.

⁵⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 March 1918.

⁵⁷ *Daily Mirror*, 26 March 1918.

reflected in the contents of the newspapers. Although we might expect there to be nothing else but 'the great battle in France', in fact this was not so. Indeed it is surprising how little news from the Western Front the papers contained. Other campaigns were reported, notably Allenby's recent success in Palestine. There were also continuous small naval actions off the Belgian and French Coasts and air raids on Germany. On the political front the 'combing out' of men for the army and various strikes received prominence in both the news and leader sections. Also, the Irish question was not far away. Domestic reports showed that nothing changes very much; various society divorces and a bigamy trial gave some relief to the war news. Royal visits around the country and to France always made good copy. In addition, there seems to have been a continuous stream of corruption trials. The state had become a large purchaser of goods, from blankets to shells; the control of this commerce by minor officials led to the offering and passing of 'considerations' which in turn sometimes led to the police courts. Budget day on the 22 April was another source of depressing news. Taxes were increased especially on luxuries and those little necessities like drink and tobacco.⁵⁹ This managed to push the Western Front into second place on the 23 April. In the run-up to the Budget wholesalers received a bad press, being accused of holding back supplies especially cigarettes, in anticipation of tax increases.

After a month of doom and gloom the situation was rescued by the Senior Service. On St George's Day - 23 April - the famous Zeebrugge raid took place. This was a journalist's dream, being both a success and a change from trench warfare. Photographs of the battered assault ship, HMS *Vindictive*, vied with artists impressions of the daring exploit, and continued to do so while the BEF finally held the German advance.

We might consider all war news to contain some propaganda, especially when disasters were being reported. It was important to the government to maintain the country's faith in its leaders, and commitment to fighting on until Germany was defeated. One method of sustaining the public's commitment to the war was anti-German propaganda. In general the Germans were made out to be inhuman beasts, this being reinforced by the use of words like Hun or Boche, although GHQ always referred to 'the enemy'. Occasionally the Germans handed the Allies a propaganda coup by the mismanagement of their affairs; for example, the Nurse Cavell affair. In 1918 it was

⁵⁸ *Daily Graphic*, 18 April 1918.

⁵⁹ Many Excise taxes were doubled.

maltreatment of prisoners-of-war. In April 1918 the government published the report by a committee under Mr Justice Younger on the German treatment of POWs.⁶⁰ Under the headline ‘Only a German could do it, British Prisoners Bayoneted by Sentry, Hut Fire Tragedy’, the *Daily Express* reported the case of Able Seaman Genover at Brandenburg Camp. ‘He was bayoneted by a German sentry as he was trying to escape from a burning building and fell back into the flames’.⁶¹ The main complaint against the Germans’ conduct was that they used prisoners as labour in the battle area, as shown when further details of the White Paper were given on the 12 April under the typical heading ‘Prisoners as slaves: British soldiers made to work under shellfire: Whipped and kicked’.⁶² The *Daily Mail* reported:

The men were half starved. They picked up potato peelings that had been trampled under foot. An Australian private who, starving had fallen out to pick up a piece of bread left on the roadside by a Belgian woman, was shot and killed by the guard.⁶³

It is perhaps much more subtle to ridicule your opponent. On the 16 April the *Exchange Telegraph* circulated the story of the Congolese shoeblack in Brussels who had disobeyed the regulations concerning the display of the Belgian colours. He dressed in red and painted his cart yellow. With his black skin he made up the colours of the Belgian Flag. ‘He was denounced as a conspirator and ordered to be deported.’⁶⁴

Some events could be turned into propaganda. On the 23 March the Germans began bombarding Paris from the St. Gobain forest some seventy-five miles away. In all the City would receive 367 rounds.⁶⁵ At first the newspapers were more interested in how this was being done; besides just a big gun there were suggestions that electromagnetic force or rockets were involved. It would seem that an electric gun had been patented in America by a Swede, Professor Kristian Birkeland; this, and the science of ballistics, were explained in long articles.⁶⁶ At first the shelling of Paris was a propaganda victory for the Germans. On the 25 March they announced ‘We have bombarded the fortress of Paris with long distance guns’.⁶⁷ More worrying for the

⁶⁰ Robert Younger (1861-1946). High court judge 1915-19, principal British delegate on the Reparations Commission 1925-31. Entry in *Who Was Who*.

⁶¹ *Daily Express*, 3 April 1918.

⁶² *Daily Express*, 12 April 1918.

⁶³ *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1918.

⁶⁴ *Daily Express*, 16 April 1918.

⁶⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol I, p. 327.

⁶⁶ Kristian Birkeland (1867-1917), Professor of Physics at Oslo University where he demonstrated the electro-magnetic nature of the aurora borealis. Entry in *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, 1990 edition, p. 156.

⁶⁷ *Daily Express*, 25 March 1918.

British was a report that 'Austrian military circles are of the opinion that the bombardment of the city of Paris is only a trial of the cannon, which are really to be directed against London.'⁶⁸ However, on Good Friday (29 March) a shell hit a Paris church causing many casualties, which prompted an editorial in the *Daily Express* 'The Unspeakable Hun: The German has achieved a further claim to universal execration by the bombardment of a Paris church on Good Friday and the massacre of seventy-five worshipers before the high altar of Christianity'.⁶⁹

The British on the other hand were portrayed as heroes 'playing the game'. German prisoners were shown being cared for, with an almost obligatory mug or cigarette in hand. A picture in the *Illustrated London News* under the headline 'A British Officer's act of courtesy', showed him handing his water bottle to a German prisoner.⁷⁰ Heroism sometimes cut both ways. On the 21 April, the German air ace, Baron von Richthofen, was shot down. Instead of glee the papers were very respectful. For example, the *Daily Mirror* carried a picture of the burial party with the front page headline 'Honour to a Brave Enemy'.⁷¹ Continuing in this vein, there were also editorials with Homeric overtones. For example:

The heroes of antiquity must be watching this war from their resting places in the shades with a little natural jealousy. No longer will men prate of the deeds of Hector and Achilles. The modern world has its own heroes, until the past three years unknown and unsuspected, and their deeds are more wonderful than poets ever dreamed for the heroes of Greece and Troy.⁷²

It has been shown that the public were accurately kept informed of the seriousness of the situation in France, and the failure to hold the line was admitted. On the other hand, the German attempt to win the war was portrayed as being made at enormous cost. As might be expected, failures by Britain's allies were dressed up as stands to the last man. In general, the impression from the newspaper editorials was that the BEF knew what it was doing, and expected the support of those at home. This was reinforced by the war correspondents' dispatches, although these have been shown to contain many fabrications.

Yet after the war there was a general feeling that the public had been poorly

⁶⁸ *Daily Express*, 28 March 1918.

⁶⁹ *Daily Express*, 1 April 1918.

⁷⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 6 April 1918.

⁷¹ *Daily Mirror*, 30 April 1918.

⁷² *Daily Express*, 30 March 1918.

served by the Press, and that the 'truth' had been withheld. Knightley quotes Lloyd George as saying 'If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow'.⁷³ Montague further argues that reports of actions were so unlike the reality that the fighting men 'found the Press out'.⁷⁴ The troops also objected to being portrayed as spoiling for a fight, 'enjoying nothing better than going over the top'.⁷⁵ Even though Gibbs thought that the war correspondent's task was a 'job worth doing, and not badly done',⁷⁶ there is some truth in these allegations, so what went wrong?

Kitchener's refusal to allow correspondents to go to France, and the subsequent use of 'Eyewitness' accounts, meant that war reporting got off to a bad start. This state-of-affairs was not helped by the army's attitude to reporters. Chaos at the beginning was not confined to the Press, although by the second half of 1916 the BEF was becoming an efficient organisation, while war reporting was at this time just starting to find its feet. Unfortunately, the die was cast and war correspondents had no means of changing the system. The newspaper proprietors became part of the government machine, and so were unable, or unwilling, to try to present the war as it was.

It would be easy to blame the censorship for the failure of the Press to present the war as it was. Certainly, in the early years there was an almost paranoid fear of giving away any information to the Germans, but as time went on things became more relaxed. No doubt the strictness of the censorship can be blamed on the government's lack of experience, but again the pattern was set at the beginning. Even relaxing the censorship would not have given the public what they wanted - victories won by heroes. What they got, and could not understand because it was not explained, was attrition battles fought by heroes. Even if we take away the censorship many of the problems of reporting the war still exist.

To be effective the war correspondents had to be part of the GHQ team; Gibbs admits that they existed between two worlds, the army and the civilians, while belonging to neither. Also, by being close to GHQ they became part of the great charade, and together with many of the newspaper owners subjugated their campaigning zeal for the good of King and Country. However much they may have justified their actions in memoirs after the war the fact remains that the Press, by remaining silent, allowed the authorities to sweep many deficiencies under the carpet.

⁷³ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p. 109, quoting Lloyd George - CP Scott in 1917.

⁷⁴ Montague, C, *Disenchantment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1924), p. 102.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Gibbs, P, *Adventures in Journalism* (London: Heinemann, 1923), p. 253.

Even though the correspondents won the ‘hearts and minds’ battle with GHQ they did not change the style of writing which shows that they did not adapt to the modern style of battle. They were used to reporting small battles of a few days duration at the most, perhaps looking down from some hill top, metaphorical or real. Suddenly the scale of warfare changed and huge numbers of men were involved. For example, even an early battle such as Loos in 1915 involved six divisions in the initial assault, some 100,000 men. Because the battles went on for weeks the correspondents could only write vignettes on small actions. GHQ on the other hand chose a minimalist style that both gave nothing away and said nothing - perhaps they wished to give the impression that they were far too busy to write dispatches. Thus between them GHQ and the war correspondents were unable to give a clear account of what was happening which surely is what the public wanted to know.

Yet the two parties could have produced much better copy. If GHQ found it difficult to write descriptive prose, they had the experts literally down the road, and better communiqués would have given leader writers more to work with. A day-by-day official history would have been too much to ask for, but descriptions of important actions written after the event when reports were to hand would have satisfied the public’s need for information. There are occasional glimpses of this. On the 15 April GHQ released a description of the defence of Givenchy by the 55th Division. Consider the following extract.

Throughout the early part of the morning of April 9 the 55th Division beat off all attacks in its forward zone and maintained its line intact. Later, when the German infantry had broken through the Portuguese position on its left, the division formed a defensive flank facing north-east on the line Givenchy - Festubert to the neighbourhood of Le Touret. This line it maintained practically unchanged until relief, through six days of almost continual fighting, in the course of which it beat off repeated German attacks with the heaviest losses to the enemy and took nearly 1000 prisoners.⁷⁷

This rather wooden, but completely accurate, description may be compared with Gibbs’ version of the first day of the battle.

I have told in my previous message the first outline of what happened yesterday, but there is more to tell. The great achievement of the day on the part of our troops engaged was the magnificent stand of the 55th Division - all Lancashire troops - who held our right flank firm against fierce, repeated attacks, some four times stronger than themselves in numbers, and who, when the Portuguese troops on their left were broken,

⁷⁷ *Daily Mail*, 16 April 1918.

formed flank on their left, and so withstood the enemy's hammer blows that at the end of the day and this morning our line was unbroken there. Givenchy was still ours, and the enemy's waves of men lay shattered in front of them, and 750 prisoners were in our hands.⁷⁸

It is surely not a huge step to combine these two into a reasonable account. Had they wished, the army and the Press could have forced this style of reporting on the authorities from the beginning, there being no precedent for reporting total war. Unfortunately, relationships got in the way and the army probably felt this was a battle they did not need to fight, so a great opportunity was missed.

⁷⁸ Gibbs, *Open Warfare*, p. 234.

CONCLUSIONS

Absolute terms like winning and losing are difficult to apply to the attritional battles of the Great War as they imply some sort of final result. Even the war itself ended in an armistice rather than a surrender which enabled the German Army to claim that they had not been defeated in the field, therefore it is difficult to apply terms such as this to the Great War battles. They often went on for months and were in themselves a series of battles. After the war the War Office Battle Nomenclature Committee used the concept of a main battle and subsidiary ones in awarding Battle Honours; for example, for the Lys there is the main honour and eight subsidiary ones.¹ Even then it can be difficult to define a winner. The first two, Estaires and Messines, were German victories as here they broke through the British front line and captured the area defined by the battle area, but Bailleul where the Germans took the town but were then stopped might be considered a draw, and a similar argument may be used for Hazebrouck. It may be better to look at who gained the advantage by realising their objectives.

Using this criteria the Germans gained nothing. They did not win the war, as the BEF, although badly mauled, remained intact as a fighting force, and the territory they captured was of no use to them; in fact, it was counter-productive as the line now took more divisions to defend and they were forward of their prepared positions where the troops could live in relative comfort. On the Somme and in front of Ypres supplies to the front had to cross devastated areas, which meant that further offensives would be difficult to maintain. On the other hand, the Allies had gained much. Their main objective, to buy time by holding the Germans until sufficient American troops had arrived in France, had been achieved, together with the windfall of a co-ordinated command. The BEF had gained experience in mobile warfare, or at least warfare as mobile as it was ever going to be on the Western Front, and the new organisation of divisions and machine-guns had had a shakedown. GDC Money made the point to Edmonds that the machine-gun battalions had just been formed and were unpopular with brigade and battalion commanders, who resented them being placed under divisional

¹ Estaires, Messines, Hazebrouck, Bailleul, 1st Kemmel, Béthune, 2nd Kemmel and Scherpenberg.

HQ command.² This view changed after the Lys due to the excellent work which they did. Thus using the advantage criterion the Allies were the clear victors; however, this still does not completely explain why the Germans lost.

One common factor in the German offensives against the BEF was the weather, and consequently the foggy mornings of March and April 1918 have produced one of the great ‘might have beens’ of the Great War. Opinions varied about the relative advantages and disadvantages the weather gave to each side, and allowed the army to claim some sort of *force majeure* in mitigation. For example, the BGRA of XV Corps, Brigadier-General Kirwan, felt that the results would have been different without the fog as after the divisional artillery was lost in the initial attack, the corps guns could only fire by map and calculation.³ It is worth noting that the British seem to have made no preparations for the Germans’ use of smoke shell.

Morning fog or mist is quite common in Europe, yet neither side seems to have made any provision for effects of weather in their plans, even though visual observation was important to both sides’ tactics. The British were relying on the machine-gun as their main defensive weapon, placing belts of wire so that the attackers were drawn into their fields of fire. With their machine-guns blinded they had little chance to open fire before the Germans were upon them. Where the telephone failed due to the preliminary bombardment, cutting unburied cables, the SOS rockets sent up by the front-line infantry to call up an artillery barrage on the German positions in the event of an attack could not be seen. On the German side, after the first two hours of the bombardment there were to be three periods of ten minutes each when the range of specific targets was to be visually checked ready for the final two hours. They were unable to do this and had to rely on predictions made before the battle. However, on the day the sheer intensity of the bombardment probably made little difference. There is no evidence of them using large amounts of smoke shell in their bombardment to create an artificial fog to cover the initial assault. They were content to knock out the command and artillery, which together with the sheer force of the final stage, to paralysed the defenders. The Germans were also using rockets or flares, the leading squads were to show the way by firing flares as they found the gaps in the British defences. Also, neither side was able to make any use of aerial observation.

We tend to look at who received an advantage from the fog, whereas, as has been

² PRO CAB 45/124: GDC Money (55th Machine-gun Battalion) to Edmonds.

³ PRO CAB 45/124: BRK Kirwan (BGRA XV Corps) to Edmonds.

shown above, it was really a hindrance and the degree to which it disadvantaged each side changed as time went on. Early on the fog disadvantaged the British by blinding the defenders, so that the first Germans to be seen often came from the rear. Once they were past the front positions the situation changed and the fog caused the Germans considerable difficulties. No landmarks could be seen and the leading troops had to feel their way which had two effects: they lost the creeping barrage and, moving slower than expected, the infantry behind began to bunch. When the fog lifted these often battalion sized groups made excellent targets for the any British artillery that had survived. The fog disadvantaged both sides, but was used by the BEF as an excuse to cover poor defensive tactics.

It is a natural step to use the German experience as a benchmark against which to judge the BEF's efforts. However, it must be remembered that this is a comparison of two quite different armies. The German started the war with a large conscript army whereas the British had to spend the first two years of the war building a citizen army. Thus the British has to fight the whole war with no NCO or junior officer cadre, and a chronic shortage of experienced staff officers. It was only in 1917 that the BEF became an effective force in the offensive having learned the necessary lessons in the hard school of 1915 and 1916.

The view that when faced with the need to go on the defensive all the BEF had to do was apply the German manuals is far too simple. The captured manuals did not contain a magic formula which, if followed, produced a defensive scheme. Rather they were a set of principles to be applied when producing a defensive scheme for a particular area or position. The user was assumed to have knowledge of the defensive battle and was expected to apply this experience. Without this basic ingredient of experience GHQ was bound to fail. When the manuals were first issued to the German Army it took seven months to train an army in their use that had been on the defensive for two years. The BEF had two months to introduce a doctrine into four Armies containing 47 divisions with a wide range of ability in their commanders. The defensive doctrine proposed by the committee of three officers, which was based on a lightly held front line with a main line of defence behind, could have been achieved in time. In fact, it is what De Lisle and Haking constructed. This lack of experience meant that often too many men were put in to the front line which was then subjected to the full force of the German bombardment. When the German storm-troops attacked, the front-line

defenders were overwhelmed and consequently much of the garrison lost.

The BEF made the same two fundamental mistakes in their defence of the Lys front as they did in Picardy: the order to stand and fight and the placing of too many men too far forward. It has been shown in chapter 1 that these two concepts were part of the German defensive doctrine early in the war and were changed in the light of experience. The Allies now had to learn the same lesson. They had missed the point of the use of the machine-gun in defence: 'In the German conception the machine-gun defence replaced manpower sufficiently to allow two-thirds of the garrison to be mobile for immediate counter-attack, the British copy placed two-thirds or more in the defended localities.'⁴ The shortage of infantry in the Fifth Army area led to them trying to defend a series of positions, rather than one continuous front line, the so-called 'blob' defence.

Forward defended localities were made by combining sectors of the front and support trenches, about 200 yards apart, into centres of resistance and grouping 150 - 300 men into each with one or more machine-guns as support weapons. The second row was made by treating the reserve trench, 2500 yards behind in the same way. To satisfy the German instruction that machine-guns were the backbone of the defence, an intermediate row of single machine-guns was added, but without any special cover of infantry protection.⁵

Edmonds excused the packing of the front line on account of the shortage of manpower: '... the length of front line was so great in proportion to the number of men available, and absorbed so many battalions, that the garrisons of the two rearward zones had of necessity to be smaller than they should have been, even had the defences been complete.'⁶ For some reason the British command did not take into account the power of artillery fire, something it had used to great effect during the previous two years. Positioning most of the defenders in the second line, be it trenches or blobs, would have put them out of range of the German field artillery and trench mortars and more would have survived the bombardment. We have seen that this concept was used successfully by XIII Corps and 55th Division, but GHQ was unwilling to give up the front line, often won at great cost, without a fight, as it was considered the jumping-off point for the next offensive.

Most of the defensive schemes produced during the winter had to be abandoned because there were insufficient divisions to fulfil them. For example, the 40th Division

⁴ Wynne GC, 'Pattern for Limited (Nuclear) War: The Riddle of the Schlieffen Plan', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. CIII (Feb. 1958), pp. 40-50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 257.

south of Armentières was defending a sector designed for two divisions. Also, many of the divisions which had already been engaged in Picardy had battalions that were either depleted in numbers or contained many draftees rushed over from the UK. For example, the 51st Division had lost 219 officers and 4696 other ranks in March, subsequently receiving a draft of 3000 men but few officers.⁷ In general regimental officers were pleased with the quality of these reinforcements; the 10th Royal Waricks received a draft early in the battle and the CO wrote 'I remember this because I was so delighted that the new draft, consisting mainly of young experienced soldiers, held their ground'.⁸ This may have influenced the dispositions, but whatever the reason the idea of 'to the last man and the last bullet' meant that the casualties from the German bombardment were heavy.

In his memoirs Lord Chandos described the action of the 4th Guards Brigade as a soldier's battle,⁹ and this may be said to be true of all the Spring Offensives. Divisions and brigades were the formations on the spot and events moved so fast that corps and army commanders could do little in a tactical sense except 'rubber stamp' the actions of their subordinates. This was not a failure but a hard fact of life. The function of the higher staffs in this situation was to keep the supplies moving, which may sound a mundane job, but it was essential for the men at the front. Besides rations, which could be gone without or extemporised, the infantry and artillery required ammunition. The 5th Division fired two and a half million rounds of SAA on the 13th,¹⁰ and de Lisle recorded that the artillery within XV Corps used on average 450 tons of shells per day.¹¹ The BEF's stockpile of ammunition was prodigious, Edmonds giving the figure of a half-million tons being available in army dumps. As a consequence of the retreat all kinds of military equipment had to be replaced and again army stocks were able to meet requirements.

In many ways the Lys battle is similar to the Somme but two of the reasons, or excuses, for poor performance are missing: the dilution of the defenders by the extension of the Fifth Army line and poor performance by the neighbouring French. Significantly, there was no repeat of the retreat by the Fifth Army. The gap left by the Portuguese retreat and the pushing aside of the 40th Division was soon plugged. For the

⁷ PRO CAB 45/122: FW Bewsher (GSO2 51st Division) to Edmonds.

⁸ PRO CAB 45/123: AS Fitzgerald (10th R Warcs., 57th Brigade, 19th Division) to Edmonds.

⁹ Chandos, *Memoirs*, p. 99.

¹⁰ Atkinson CT, *The Devonshire Regiment 1914-18* (Exeter: Eland, 1926), p. 340.

¹¹ De Lisle, *Reminiscences*, Vol II, p. 166.

next three days the Germans had their best chance of success while the front remained fluid between Merville and Messines. The Germans were unable to exploit this weakness due to difficulties of supply and the tenacity of the defenders. When the BEF had effective infantry/artillery co-operation working the Germans had the utmost difficulty in getting the battle moving again. The best example of this is the five days it took to complete the preparations for the second attack on Kemmel Hill.

The British use of reserves in the battle is interesting. Instead of putting relieving divisions into the line, they were formed up in a good position behind and the front was allowed to come to them. Small units and groups of stragglers were formed into composite battalions or brigades and used to augment depleted divisions. The BEF had the opportunity to apply lessons recently learned on the Somme because of the 26 divisions involved in the battle 18 had already been engaged in the March battles.

Some commanders learned the lessons of battle very quickly. On taking up the command of XI Corps north of the La Bassée canal Lieut.-General Haking re-organised the defences of his area using the lessons learned in Italy where the Germans had tried out their new tactics at Caporetto. It was these defences that enabled the 55th Division to be the only one to withstand the German onslaught on the Lys. It is surely not a coincidence that the GOC of this division was one of the committee who had advised GHQ four months before. Lieut.-General de Lisle made a similar re-organisation when he took over XIII Corps a few days before the Arras attack on the 28 March. Both these corps had used the suggestion of the committee for a linear defence. Thus, it took experience, rather than manuals, before the Allied commanders could get it right.

As we might expect the BEF did well in the one subject they understood – logistics. Detailed arrangements for the supply of each army were made and a new railway was built behind the front to facilitate movements between them.

Previous studies have shown that the German Army had a system which allowed them to devise and disseminate doctrine and also a specialist, Colonel von Lossberg, to apply it. This thesis has shown that the key to the German success was their willingness to use the experience of this one officer to counter all the British offensives of 1916 and 17. In addition, the German experience of the defensive battle led them to reverse many of the pre-war maxims that were ingrained in the army's culture. The most important of these were abandoning the use of forward slopes, stopping the 'waste' entailed in retaking of lost ground of no tactical importance and introducing the distribution of the defenders in

depth (light holding of the front line - the bulk of the defenders in the rear).

It has been shown in the preceding chapters that the Germans never matched their advance on the 9 April and in fact were easily stopped or slowed, as shown by the action of the King Edward's Horse and the XV Corps Cyclists in the first hours of the battle. The subsequent retreat had more to do with the weight of numbers than new tactics, but on the face of it the new German tactics look unbeatable. Both the intense bombardment and infiltration tactics had been tried already at Riga and Cambrai and found to work.

At first sight the German preparations for the Spring Offensives seem impeccable. An analysis of the tactical problems, the use of tactics new to the Western Front but proved elsewhere, and a return to the use of surprise would seem to guarantee success. However, a more careful analysis shows gaps in their strategic and tactical thinking.

The Germans identified three possible areas for an attack – Verdun, the Somme and the Lys Valley – which had to commence before the Allies could start an offensive. While the terrain allowed an attack to be started at any time on the Somme or either side of Verdun, since the ground in the Lys Valley would be wet until April, no northern attack could have been opened earlier.¹² Ideally there should have been two simultaneous attacks to draw in the British reserves but Ludendorff considered he had insufficient forces for this. It would seem that the idea of pinching out the Verdun salient was disregarded for fear of the British starting a counter-offensive in Flanders.

While Ludendorff's reasoning is valid, attacking the French offered an option which might have made it difficult for Britain to continue the war in France. Any attack between the Oise and Verdun would threaten Paris and the loss of Verdun, as Wetzell pointed out, might break the French Army and cause a political collapse. The British might be forced to form a box round the Channel Ports. Even if the Germans were able to defeat the BEF they still had to deal with the French. There was surely every chance that the defeat of the French would make a British presence on the continent extremely difficult.

Wetzell pointed out in his analysis, that a decisive result was unlikely from one large battle. Instead, a series of attacks would be required, these continuous attacks ending on a good defensive line would paralyse the enemy's reserves. In fact, this was really the only option open to the Germans as they had no way of exploiting any

breakthrough, and who had to overcome the logistical difficulty presented by crossing the front line area, and in Picardy the additional obstacle of the old Somme battlefield. A series of attacks would also keep the initiative with the Germans. Ludendorff ignored this advice and prepared to break through on a grand scale and roll up the British front from the south. Coincidentally, on both sides of the line the views of experts were being ignored. In both cases the reports did not coincide with the views of the commander and so were pushed aside, although subsequently the experts were proved to be right.

Ludendorff's wish for a decision from the Michael attack, inspired by political considerations as much as military, meant that he kept the battle going too long. By 26 March the German troops were tiring and French reinforcements were beginning to arrive; now was the time to turn the attention elsewhere. However, is it realistic to expect a commander to stop a battle when all is going well? Ludendorff succumbed to the temptation and continued the battle with no means to exploit the breakdown of the British front that might occur at anytime. If Ludendorff had stopped the battle he would still have had the option of attacking the Allies elsewhere or restarting the battle on the Somme. With hindsight we may say that now was surely the time to attack the French. After a few days rest and re-supply von Hutier's army was in an excellent position to wheel south. To cover this time any of the prepared attacks on the French could be opened. However, the German concentration on defeating the British meant that an attack in Flanders was still necessary.

The series of consecutive co-ordinated attacks proposed by Colonel Wetzell may not have had the desired effect, even though this was the method used by the Allies to force the Germans to an armistice later in the year. The crisis would have created the unified command, the only way of utilising the French reserves, and the British reserves held in the UK would have had time to cross the Channel. We have seen how quickly many commanders learned the art of defence. With a number of attacks this process may have accelerated making the Germans' task more difficult.

We might conclude that the Germans had set themselves an impossible task, and that a military decision on the Western Front was not possible until a situation was reached where one side had insufficient forces to continue the fight and thus the political will to continue the war would evaporate. From the German perspective the Allies were not going to run out of men – the Americans were coming and so one last gamble was worth it. The Battles of the Lys shows that even against a weakened defender, the

¹² In fact the Spring was unusually dry, while the previous summer had been wet.

resilience of a defensive line was such that a complete break through was not possible. In fact, lines of trenches were not stone castle walls, and defenders could create a position anywhere. What was required was the determination to hold on.

As in the March offensive Ludendorff kept the battle going far too long. He should have moved elsewhere after the 16 or 17 April. Remembering Haig's reluctance to stop the British offensives of 1916 and 1917 this may have been a fault of all commanders on the Western Front. One can imagine the temptation, victory required just one more push, and in Ludendorff's case the prize was almost within his grasp twice in one month. Amiens was almost taken; had he been able to put in a few more fresh divisions, and the Flanders hills, with their wonderful observation, would have been his. In reality this was an illusion, since after the initial shock the defenders were always able to gather themselves together.

It is difficult to see why the Germans decided to implement the Mars attack, rather than go straight to Flanders, it only widened the existing front. Also Ludendorff knew Mars/Valkerie was difficult.¹³ Surely it was better to attack in the north as soon as Michael had started and keep the pressure on the British. An attack in Flanders had much going for it, as there was little room for manoeuvre behind the British front and the Channel Ports could be threatened if not captured. The concern about a wet spring, which would make the going soft for the transport, was unfounded as the early months of 1918 were unusually dry. If Ludendorff had followed the advice of his chief strategist, Colonel Wetzell, the attack in Flanders could have started on the 1 April at the latest. This would have made the situation for the BEF much more serious. Divisions that had been moved south had yet to be replaced by reconstituted divisions from the Third and Fifth Armies. The flow of reinforcements from Britain had yet to become a flood as the new shipping arrangements did not begin to be effective until the beginning of April. The Germans may also have been able to attack on a wider front, and an attack on either side of Ypres as well as against the Portuguese might have caused the weakened British front to collapse. This had a better chance of success than the series of attacks they were forced to mount and given greater opportunities for exploitation. The Germans were reacting to events rather than forcing them which does not work with mass armies as the logistics and planning takes too long to organise.

The Germans' logistical problems extended to moving their 'siege train' from one battle area to another. This meant that they could not start offensives at will. Also,

even with their eastern bonus, there were still only sufficient troops to carry out one main attack. The original George attack had been planned to be the main thrust, but this was changed to Michael which could be undertaken earlier as the soil in Flanders was expected to be wet after the winter rains. Thus the original George, which extended from the La Bassée canal to the sea had to be scaled down and became Georgette. After Michael, Bruchmüller's battering train moved to the Arras front to make ready for Mars and Valkyrie. When the Mars attack did not succeed on the 28 March, Valkerie which was due to be launched the next day was cancelled as it was not considered viable.¹⁴ Orders were given for Georgette to be implemented as soon as possible. Unfortunately for the Germans it took ten days to move all the heavy guns and put the ammunition in place.

Thus it was not tactics that defeated the Germans but logistics and time. Any serious advance on the Western Front required guns and supply wagons to be moved across no-man's-land and the enemy trench system. Although they laid in stocks of road making material, and used Portuguese prisoners to lay it, they were never able to supply a sufficiency of material. The problem increased as time went on and more men and material were fed into the battle. Thus the Germans had to pause for five days (20 - 24 April) while they amassed sufficient artillery ammunition for the second attack on Kemmel. An added frustration for the Germans on the Lys was that the main roads did not coincide with the direction of their proposed advance. The Germans were aware that the Allies had the ability to move reinforcements quickly by road and rail and so were far too optimistic about the speed at which the advance could take place. In fact, part of the British defensive preparations had been the construction of a railway running parallel to their front for just this purpose.¹⁵ After the first week of the battle the advance came almost to a halt and their only important gain in the next two weeks was Kemmel Hill.

The preliminary bombardment would always be successful against an enemy with rigid defensive tactics. The command infrastructure was destroyed or at the least severely disabled, artillery and machine-gun positions were neutralised and the infantry were sufficiently dazed to allow the passage of the assault troops. Unfortunately, even with a bombardment of this intensity it was not possible to knock out every artillery

¹³ Official History, 1918, Vol. I, p. 143.

¹⁴ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 74.

¹⁵ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 54.

battery or machine-gun nest and so, as always happens in desperate times, a few men were able to hold up the advance of whole divisions. Where the defence was more flexible, especially when the front line was vacated, 'Bruchmüller's Orchestra' was reduced to a fireworks display. However, it must be said that due to poor Allied defensive tactics it succeeded many more times than it failed.

The effectiveness of storm-troops has perhaps had a better press than it deserves. John Terraine has pointed out that the storm-troops were an expedient and not representative of the whole German Army,¹⁶ while Ludendorff complained that the irreplaceable losses of so many of the old pre-war officer and NCO cadre had turned the army into a militia. Taking out the best men to form elite units in storm divisions meant that the remaining 'trench divisions', which were the German reserve, were of dubious quality.

Once through the enemy's defensive system the Germans had very little that was new to offer. It is true that the skid-mounted mortars and machine-guns together with the light field-guns enabled their infantry to take some fire-power with them, but it was small compared with what the British could muster once they had recovered from the initial shock. It might be said that the Germans had given little thought to the breakout phase of the battle. Ludendorff famously said: 'We chop a hole. The rest follows. We did it that way in Russia.'¹⁷ The traditional way of exploiting a breakthrough was with the *arme blanche*, but at this point of the war the German cavalry was policing their eastern conquests. Although we may question the wisdom of using cavalry against troops armed with rifles and machine-guns supported by artillery, mounted infantry would have given them a method of exploiting gaps or bringing up reinforcements quickly. As it was they limited the speed of their advance to walking pace while the Allies were able to bring up troops in lorries or by train.

While the results of the Spring Offensives were all negative for the Germans, there was a positive outcome for the Allies in the higher direction of the war. At last, there was a unified command, even if it was only Foch and his small staff. While the main dividend of this move was to be had in the future when the Allies went on the offensive, the Lys may be considered its first test, and gave the individual commanders-in-chief a period to settle into their new roles. It is questionable whether Haig would have received the

¹⁶ Terraine, J, *To Win a War: 1918, The Year of Victory* (London: Papermac Edition, 1986), p. 38.

¹⁷ Official History, 1918, Vol. II, p. 464

French divisions in Flanders and reserves behind the rest of his front without the intervention of Foch. The French failure at Kemmel was hardly Foch's fault. It might even be argued that the appointment of Foch gave the generals complete control of operations on the Western Front for the first time. The Beauvais Agreement handed over to Foch 'The strategic direction of military operations'. While the politicians looked at how to win the war in 1919 the winning team would finish the war in 1918.

There is some credit due to Sir Henry Wilson for bringing this about. Whatever else he did, his meeting with Foch on the evening of 24 March speeded up the process of Foch's appointment, at a time when quick action was required. While it may be too much to say that Wilson saved the day he certainly acted as a catalyst.

The new command structure also made Haig's position more secure. While Lloyd George would have liked to have sacked Haig he was prevented from doing so by the lack of a suitable replacement and fear of the repercussions. This is probably why he tried the next best thing of reducing his power. Haig's supporters in the establishment could have made political difficulties for Lloyd George, and there was the problem of hostile public reaction if Haig was sacked. A study of the newspapers of the time shows that Haig was synonymous with the BEF. In fact, there is hardly a day when his name was not mentioned in the Press. It is hard to imagine the *Morning Post* keeping quite about the dismissal of Haig (or even a forced resignation).

The reaction of the Home Front to the war became more important as it moved into its fourth year with seemingly no end in sight. The government's control of the Press allowed public opinion to be manipulated which meant that the opening days of British offensives were often reported along the lines of 'a splendid day for England'. An enemy offensive presented a different challenge to war reporting, especially when German territorial gains were so large. Thus the attack was reported as the last throw of a desperate enemy, who was paying a huge price in casualties for his success, while British troops remained in good heart. The extent of the British retreat was accurately reported, the loss of major towns was made known to the public within 48 hours. Even the question of why this had happened was asked, in rather a small voice perhaps; while the newspapers answered their own question with the view that this was now the time to rally round and not to bicker, the government and the king voiced their support for the BEF.

The Lys presented the additional problem of how to report the failure of the Portuguese and French. Instead of excuses they were depicted as gallant allies doing

their best in trying circumstances. Given the British failure to hold the line this poor performance was not difficult to disguise. This is another example of the British learning to manage total war. In contrast to Kitchener's refusal to allow any war reporting the army had realised that war correspondents would not give the game away. The 'truth' was now to some extent being told.

The Spring Offensives gave the BEF a foretaste of the last 100 days. During the battle higher formations became suppliers of reinforcements and supplies rather than the givers of tactical orders. Battles were to be fought by divisions who, once committed had to act on their own initiative. This was also true for brigades and battalions. We have seen on the Lys that some commanders were quite capable of thinking for themselves. By 1918 the BEF had a weapon system that gave them the confidence and flexibility which made them overall the most effective force on the Western Front. On the Lys it has been shown that once everything was working the Germans were unable to make any appreciable headway.

However, regardless of the skill of commanders, the available firepower or the vagaries of various Allies, the battle of the Lys was won by the bravery and stoicism of the officers and men in the front line.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Public Records Office, Kew, London (PRO).

Cabinet Papers

CAB 45/122 - 125, Correspondence with the Official Historian, Battles of the Lys, 1930 - 35.

War Office Papers

WO 95 - War Diaries of Units and Formations

WO 106 - Directorate of Military Operations and Intelligence

WO 157 - Intelligence Summaries

WO 158 - Military Headquarters Papers

King's College, London: Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA).

Liddell Hart Papers

De Lisle Papers

Godley Papers

Montgomery- Massingberd Papers

Imperial War Museum (IWM).

Dawnay Papers

Diaries of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson

Horne Papers

Jeudwine Papers

Morland Papers

National Army Museum (NAM).

Bridgford Papers

West Sussex Records Office (WSRO).

Maxse Papers

Churchill College, Cambridge (CCC).

Rawlinson Papers

General Staff Publications (at IWM).

British Trench Warfare 1917-18, IWM/Battery Press Reprint (SS101 & SS196).

SS101, Notes for Infantry Officers on Trench Warfare March '16, May '17
Printing

SS196, Diagrams of Field Defences, October 1918.

SS203, Instructions for Anti-Tank Defences (Provisional), February 1918

SS210, The Division in Defence, May 1918

SS561, The Principles of Command in the Defensive Battle in Positional Warfare

SS621, General Principles of the Construction of Field Positions

Regimental Archives

Grenadier Guards

Pryce Messages

Coldstream Guards

Trappes-Lomax TB, *The 4th (Guards) Brigade in Front of Hazebrouck. April 1918*, Typescript, June 1935.

Irish Guards

Alexander HRLG, *Narrative of Operations, April 11 to 14, 1918*, Typescript, n.d.

Alexander HRLG, *Narrative of Events - 11th to 14th April 1918*, Typescript, n.d.

SECONDARY SOURCES

OFFICIAL HISTORIES

Bean, C, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, 7 vols., (Sydney, Aus.: Angus & Robertson, 1942).

Buchan, J, *The History of the South African Forces in France* (London: Nelson, 1920).

Edmonds, Sir J,

Military Operations France and Flanders (IWM Reprints with Battery Press).

Designated 'Official History' in footnotes.

Military Operations in Italy 1915-19 (London: HMSO, 1949).

Henniker, A, *Transport on the Western Front* (London: HMSO, 1937).

Jones, HA, *The War in the Air*, 7 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934).

Monash, Sir J, *The Australian Victories in France in 1918* (London: Hutchinson, 1920).

Stewart, H, *The New Zealand Division 1916-19* (Auckland NZ: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1921).

DIVISIONAL AND REGIMENTAL HISTORIES

Atkinson, CT,

The Devonshire Regiment 1914-18 (Exeter: Eland, 1926).

The History of the South Wales Borderers 1914-18 (London: Medici, 1931).

Bewsher, FW, *History of the 51st (Highland) Division* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1921).

Coop, J, *The Story of the 55th Division* (Liverpool: Daily Post, 1919).

Croft, W, *Three Years with the 9th (Scottish) Division* (London: Murray, 1919).

Crookenden, A, *History of the Cheshire Regiment in the Great War* (Chester: Evans, 1938).

Ewing, J, *The Royal Scots 1918* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1925).

Falls, C, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (Belfast: M'Caw Stevenson & Orr,

- 1922).
- Gillon, S,
The King's Own Scottish Borderers in the Great War (London: Nelson, 1930).
The Story of the 29th Division: A Record of Gallant Deeds (London: Nelson, 1925).
- Headlam, C, *The Guards Division in the Great War*, 2 vols., (London: Murray, 1924).
- Hussey, A & Inman, D, *The Fifth Division in the Great War* (London: Nisbet, 1921).
- Kenrick, N, *The Story of the Wiltshire Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1963).
- Kipling, R, *The Irish Guards in the Great War*, 2 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1923).
- Latter, JC, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers 1914-18* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1949).
- Murphy, C, *A History of the Suffolk Regiment 1914-18* (London: Hutchinson, 1928).
- Nicholson, Sir C & McMullen, H, *History of the East Lancs Regiment in the Great War* (Liverpool: Littlebury, 1936).
- Oatts, L, *Proud Heritage - The Story of the HLI 1882-1981*, 3 vols., (Edinburgh: House of Grant, 1961).
- O'Neill, H, *The Royal Fusiliers in the Great War* (London: Heinemann, 1922).
- Pearse, HW and Sloman, HS, *History of the East Surrey Regiment*, 2 vols., (London: Medici, 1932-3).
- Ponsonby, F, *The Grenadier Guards in the Great War 1914-18*, 3 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1920).
- Ross-of-Bladensburg, Sir J, *The Coldstream Guards 1914-18*, 2 vols., (London: OUP, 1928).
- Sandilands, HR, *The Fifth in the Great War* (Dover: Grigg, 1938).
- Shakespeare, J, *The 34th Division 1915-19* (London: Witherby, 1921).
- Simpson, CR, *History of the Lincolnshire Regiment 1914-18* (London: Medici, 1931).
- Stacke, H, *The Worcestershire Regiment in the Great War* (Kidderminster: Cheshire, 1929).
- Vale, W, *The History of the South Staffs Regiment* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1963).
- Wauchope, A, *A History of the Black Watch in the Great War*, 3 vols., (London: Medici, 1926).
- Whitton, F, *The History of the 40th Division* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1926).
- Wylly, HC,
The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, 2 vols., (London: RUSI, 1933).
The Border Regiment in the Great War (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1924).
The Green Howards in the Great War (Frome: Butler & Tanner, 1926).
- Wyrall, E,
The Die-Hards in the Great War, 2 vols., (London: Harrison, 1926-30).
The East Yorks Regiment in the Great War (London: Harrison, 1928).
The Gloucestershire Regiment in the War 1914-18 (London: Methuen, 1931).
The History of the 19th Division 1914-18 (London: Arnold, 1932).
The History of the Fiftieth Division 1914-19 (Bradford: Lund Humphries, 1939).
The History of the Duke of Cornwall's L.I. 1914-18 (London: Methuen, 1923).
The History of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment, 2 vols., (London: Arnold, 1928-35).
The History of the Second Division 1914-18 (London: Nelson, 1921).
The History of the Somerset Light Infantry 1914-18, (London: Methuen, 1927).
The West Yorkshire Regiment in the War, 2 vols., (London: Bodley Head, 1924).

BIOGRAPHIES, DIARIES AND PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

- Blake, Lord (ed.), *The Private Papers of Sir Douglas Haig* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952).
- Binding, R, *A Fatalist at War* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929).
- Bond, B & Robbins, S (eds.), *Staff Officer: The Diaries of Walter Guinness 1914-18* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987).
- Boraston, J, *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches* (London: Dent, 1920).
- Callwell, Sir CE, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson*, 2 vols., (London: Cassell, 1927).
- Campbell, P, *In the Cannon's Mouth* (London: Hamilton, 1934).
- Chandos, Lord,
The Memoirs of Lord Chandos (London: Bodley Head, 1962).
From Peace to War (London: Bodley Head, 1968).
- Cooper, D, *Haig*, 2 vols., (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).
- Crozier, FB, *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land* (London: Cape, 1930).
- Davidson, Sir J, *Haig - Master of the Field* (London: Nevill, 1953).
- De Lisle, Sir B, *Reminiscences of Sport and War* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1939).
- Du Cane, J, *Marshal Foch* (Privately printed: 1920), copy at IWM
- Foch, F, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, tr. Bentley Mott, T (London: Heinemann, 1931).
- Galet, E, *Albert King of the Belgians in the Great War*, tr. Swinton, E (London: Putnam, 1931).
- Goodspeed, D, *Ludendorff: Soldier, Dictator and Revolutionary* (London: Hart-Davis, 1966).
- Gough, Sir H, *The Fifth Army* (Portway Bath: Chivers, 1968).
- Graham, S, *A Private In The Guards* (London: Macmillan, 1919).
- Grange, Baroness de la, *Open House in Flanders* (London: Murray, 1929).
- Griffiths, R, *Marshall Pétain* (London: Constable paperback edition, 1994).
- Harington, Sir C, *Plumer of Messines* (London: Murray, 1935).
- Hindenburg, P von, *Out of my Life*, tr. Holt, F (London: Cassell, 1920).
- Joynt, W, *Saving the Channel Ports* (Melbourne, Aus.: Wren, 1978).
- Jünger, E, *The Storm of Steel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929).
- Lloyd George, D, *War Memoirs*, 6 vols. (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1933).
- Ludendorff, E, *My War Memoirs 1914-18*, 2 vols., (London: Hutchinson, 1919).
- Marshall-Cornwall, J, *Foch as a Military Commander* (London: Batsford, 1972).
- Maze, P, *A Frenchman in Khaki* (London: Heinemann, 1934).
- Montgomery-Cuninghame, Sir T, *Dusty Measure* (London: Murray, 1939).
- Overstraeten, R. van (ed.), *The War Diaries of Albert I* (London: Kimber, 1954).
- Powell, G, *Plumer; the Soldiers General* (London: Leo Cooper, 1990).
- Robertson, Sir W,
From Private to Field-Marshal, 2 vols., (London: Constable, 1921).
Soldiers and Statesmen, 2 vols., (London: Cassell, 1926).
- Roskill, S, *Hankey, Man of Secrets* (London: Collins, 1970).
- Tschuppik, K, *Ludendorff: The Tragedy of a Specialist*, tr. Johnston, W (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932).
- Westman, S, *Surgeon with the Kaiser's Army* (London: Kimber, 1968).

POLITICAL HISTORIES

- French, D, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition 1916-18* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
- Graham, D & Bidwell, S, *Coalitions, Politicians and Generals* (London: Brassey's, 1993).
- Grievies, K, *The Politics of Manpower* (Manchester University Press, 1988).
- Hankey, Lord, *The Supreme Command 1914-18*, 2 vols., (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961).
- Herwig, HH, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (London & New York: Arnold, 1997)
- Philpott, WJ, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-18* (London: Macmillan, 1996).
- Woodward, D, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1983).

COMMAND, TACTICS AND DOCTRINE

- Asprey, R, *The German High Command at War* (London: Little Brown, 1993).
- Bidwell, S and Graham, D, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904 - 1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982).
- Barnett, C, *The Swordbearers: Studies in Supreme Command in the First World War* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963).
- English, J, *On Infantry* (New York: Praeger, 1981).
- Griffith, P, *Battle Tactics Of The Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916 - 18* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).
- Gudmundsson, BI, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914 - 18* (New York: Praeger, 1981).
- Hutchison, G,
Machine-guns: Their History and Employment (London: Macmillan, 1938).
Warrior (London: Hutchinson, 1932).
- Lupfer, TT, *The Dynamics of Doctrine* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Combat Studies Institute, 1981).
- Priestley, R, *The Signal Service in the European War 1914-18 (France)* (Chatham: Mackay, 1921).
- Prior, R and Wilson, T, *Command On The Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914-18* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- Samuels, M, *Doctrine and Dogma* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1992).
- Travers, T,
How The War Was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917 - 19 (London: Routledge, 1992).
The Killing Ground: the British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).
- Wynne, G, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940).

HISTORIES DEALING WITH 1918

- Blaxland, G, *Amiens 1918* (London: Muller, 1968).
Essame, H, *The Battle For Europe* (London: Batsford, 1972).
Lutz, R, *The Causes of the German Collapse in 1918*, tr. Campbell, W (Stanford University Press, 1934).
Middlebrook, M, *The Kaiser's Battle. 21 March 1918: The First Day of the German Spring Offensive* (London: Penguin Edition, 1983).
Moore, W, *See How They Ran: The British Retreat of 1918* (London: Leo Cooper, 1970).
Pitt, B, *1918 The Last Act* (London: Corgi Edition, 1965).
Shaw-Sparrow, W, *The Fifth Army in March 1918* (London: Bodley Head, 1921).
Terraine, J,
 To Win a War: 1918, The Year of Victory (London: Papermac Edition, 1986).
 Impacts of War; 1914 & 1918 (London: Hutchinson: 1970).
Toland, J, *No Man's Land* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980)

PRESS AND CENSORSHIP

- Cook, Sir E, *The Press in Wartime* (London: Macmillan, 1920).
Farrar, M, *News From the Front* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998).
Gibbs, Sir P,
 Adventures in Journalism (London: Heinemann, 1923).
 Open Warfare - The Way to Victory (London: Heinemann, 1919).
Haste, C, *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War* (London: Allen Lane, 1977).
Knightley, P, *The First Casualty* (London: Deutch, 1975).
Lytton, N, *The Press and the General Staff* (London: Collins, 1920).
Montague, C, *Disenchantment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1922).
Sanders, M & Taylor, P, *British Propaganda during the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
Swinton, ED, *Eyewitness* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932).

GENERAL AND MISCELLANEOUS

- Anon., *German Army Handbook April 1918* (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1977).
Barnes, B, *This Righteous War* (London: Netherwood, 1990).
Bond, BJ, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College 1854-1914* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972).
Bond, BJ, (ed.), *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).
Churchill, Sir W, *World Crisis 1916-1918* (London: Butterworth, 1927).
Ferris, J, (ed.), *The British Army and Signals Intelligence During the First World War* (Stroud: Sutton for the Army Records Society, 1992).
Guy, AJ, Thomas, RNW & DeGroot GJ (eds.), *G, Military Miscellany* (Stroud: Sutton for the Army Records Society, 1996).
Keegan, J, *The Face of Battle* (London: Cape, 1976).
Liddell Hart, B, *History of the First World War* (London: Papermac Edition, 1992).
Occleshaw, M, *Armour Against Fate* (London: Columbus, 1989).

- Prior, R and Wilson, T, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (London & New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996).
- Repington, C, *The First World War*, 2 vols., (London: Constable, 1920).
- Smith Jr., M, *World War I in the Air* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1977).
- Swinton, Sir ED, *The Defence of Duffer's Drift* (London: Leo Cooper reprint, 1990, first published 1907)
- Terraine, J
General Jack's Diary (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964).
No Mans Land (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980).
The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-myths of War, 1861-1945 (London: Leo Cooper reprint, 1992).
- Wheeler, DL, *Republican Portugal: A Political History 1910-26* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).
- Winter, D
Haig's Command: A Reassessment (London: Penguin edition, 1993).
Death's Men (London: Penguin edition, 1979).

REFERENCE

- Enser, A, *A Subject Bibliography of the First World War* (Aldershot: Gower, 1990).
- White, A, *A Bibliography of Regimental Histories of the British Army* (Dallington: Naval and Military Press, 1992).

JOURNALS AND PERIODICALS

Army Quarterly
The Historical Journal
History Today
Journal of the Institution of Electrical Engineers
Royal United Services Institute Journal
Royal Engineers Journal

CONTEMPORARY NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

Bedford Times and Independent
Daily Express
Daily Graphic
Daily Mail
Daily Mirror
Daily Telegraph
The Globe
Illustrated London News
Morning Post
The Times